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To cite this article: Kristine Blekastad Sagheim & Øystein Aas (2020): Image dimensions of two Scandinavian endurance winter sport events, Journal of Sport & Tourism

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2020.1715828>



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Published online: 27 Jan 2020.



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Image dimensions of two Scandinavian endurance winter sport events

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates event images of two Scandinavian endurance skiing events. It adds to the relatively limited literature on endurance sport event images and provides a better understanding of how participants perceive images of the cross country ski events Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet, and to what extent the images are similar and different. A qualitative comparative case-study design was applied. The interview guide consisted of open-ended semi-structured questions, and 52 participants in Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet were interviewed during March 2017. A 'sport endurance event image' can be composed of at least ten dimensions and associated aspects: 'Organizational', 'Environmental', 'Emotional', 'Social', 'Historical', 'Physical', 'Competition', 'Cultural', 'Equipment' and 'Destination'. The findings confirm and expand earlier identified dimensions of sport event images by identifying two new dimensions ('Equipment' and 'Destination'). The image of Birkebeinerrennet was more aligned with the destination than Vasaloppet, while the overall stronger and more versatile image of Vasaloppet makes it less vulnerable to loss of interest from narrow segments of participants. We offer insights about how participants perceive the race images, how two rather similar events also differ in their images, and how this can contribute to a better understanding of differences in popularity. The findings can help organisers work towards images that attract desirable visitors and participants. Future research should follow up these findings through quantitative investigations across different types of long-distance, endurance sport events taking place in different environments, seasons and regions.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 July 2019
Accepted 10 January 2020

KEYWORDS

Endurance winter sport events; sport event image; destination image; Birkebeinerrennet; Vasaloppet

Introduction

Participatory sport events are considered one of the fastest-growing niches in sport tourism (Getz & Page, 2016b; Hudson & Hudson, 2015; Hinch and Higham, 2011). When people make decisions about what event to sign up for, the image they have of the

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event can be decisive (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010). An image is the sum of the interactions between a person's ideas, feelings and impressions associated with a target and people use these images to describe, remember and refer to these targets (Brønn & Ihlen, 2009; Conte & Paolucci, 2002; Kearns, Kearns, & Lawson, 2013) (Brønn & Ihlen, 2009; Kearns et al., 2013). An image is something stakeholders and customers create organically of goods and services, not something the producers of those goods and services create by themselves primarily through marketing efforts.

The term 'sport event' is used to describe a certain competition. Sport events are normally 'fixed in time and space by its rules and venue' (Getz, 2005, p. 15), and various approaches have been used to examine and categorise different events. Some simple categorisations are whether they are; (a) indoor or outdoor; (b) land, water or air-based; (c) regularly scheduled, periodic or one-time-only; (d) public with spectators or private; (e) professional, amateur or combined; and (f) at fixed or alternating locations (Getz, 2005). Seen from a tourism perspective, sport-event tourism includes elite events, non-elite events and combinations of these, based on the number of professional athletes and non-elite competitors participating and number and type of spectators (Hudson & Hudson, 2015). The 'portfolio approach' (Getz, 2007; Getz & Page, 2016a; Getz & Page, 2016b) describes what destinations want from events and how values can be measured. It also divides events into four levels; local or regional events, periodic hallmark events and occasional mega-events.

An interesting and important niche within sport events are participatory endurance (long-distance) sport events, such as long-distance trail and road running (e.g. marathons, ultramarathons), cycling and triathlons (Aicher & Newland, 2018; Newland & Aicher, 2018). These events are often characterised by being held outdoors, land or water based, usually regularly scheduled, combining elite and amateur participants, and held at fixed locations. While there are obvious linkages between destination image and event images, they are definitely not the same and must be assessed separately (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007a; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007b). Participants' experiences from endurance sport events and interpretation of their images have been subject to some research, but scholars have called for more research around a better understanding of sport event images (Aicher & Newland, 2018; Gwinner, 1997; Hallmann, Kaplanidou, & Breuer, 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Newland & Aicher, 2018; Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, & Kaplanidou, 2016). It is crucial for event providers to understand the images of their events and how these are interpreted by participants, as well as to what extent marketing efforts can mitigate negative aspects of the image. Knowledge about the image is especially important if there is uncertainty associated with the image of the event (Chalip, 2001, cited in Hallmann et al., 2010). Images are personal and vary between participants and over time. Thus, experts argue that organisations should study participant's perceptions of the organisation's image on a regular basis (Barich & Kotler, 1991), especially to discover attributes impairing the image and to identify dimensions where the organisation should improve compared to its competitors.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the relatively limited research on endurance sport event image. We are not aware of research investigating snow/winter, skiing and endurance events hosted in northern regions. Therefore, we chose to study participant's images of two winter sport endurance events: the well-established Scandinavian cross-country skiing events Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet.

Taking a point of departure from previously identified dimensions of endurance sport event images (see below), our research questions were:

- What dimensions can be identified to define the image of two Scandinavian endurance winter sport events, as seen by amateur participants?
- What are the primary meanings that informants associate with the different image dimensions?
- What are the similarities and differences between the images of the two winter endurance events studied?
- What are the similarities and differences between the image dimensions of the studied winter sport events and previously studied summer sport events?

Based on the findings, we discuss how they contribute to an improved understanding of sport event images in general, and specifically to hallmark endurance events, across summer and winter seasons and different regions.

Theoretical framework: sport event image

To successfully understand 'sport event images', studies should be based on a relevant framework. However, a clear definition is lacking (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007a) and there is relatively limited research on participant's sport event images, even though most participants have intensive image-creating experiences before, during, and after an event (Gwinner, 1997; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007b; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Gwinner (1997) defined 'event image' as a function of three factors that affect people's perceptions: event type (e.g. sport, music or art), event characteristics (e.g. event size, history and venue), and individual factors (e.g. number of meanings, strength of meanings and past history with the event). This definition has been criticised for not capturing key factors in sport events such as competition, socialisation, and knowledge and skills (Hallmann et al., 2010). Hallmann et al. (2010) further claimed that the event's size, type of people visiting and experiencing the event (e.g. active or passive, on location or on TV/internet), and kind of destination (e.g. urban or rural) are important criteria to assess when considering how participants and spectators develop images of sport events.

Kaplanidou (2010) suggested that approaches from destination image analyses could assist to improve the conceptualisation of sport event image. While we do not go into detail on the significant literature on destination image here, it is often (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010) operationalised using four common components covering functional and psychological aspects: cognitive (beliefs), affective (feelings), conative (behavioural) and global/holistic components (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010). According to these components, 'image' can be affected by common functional characteristics such as price level, types of accommodation, and quality of logistics, as well as psychological characteristics such as unique atmospheres and emotional feelings associated with the event (Aicher & Newland, 2018).

Recent research has suggested that 'sport event image' can be operationalised into certain dimensions (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010;

Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Kaplanidou and Vogt (2010) studied a small-scale endurance bicycle race in the United States and found that participant's image dimensions could be labelled 'Organizational,' 'Environmental,' 'Physical,' 'Social' and 'Emotional'. The relevance and validity of these dimensions were then tested on a larger event, the Athens Classic Marathon (Kaplanidou, 2010). The results confirmed that the same five overarching themes emerged there plus the dimension 'Historical' (Kaplanidou, 2010). Hallmann et al. (2010) studied four German marathon events, and their findings supported previously identified dimensions. Amateur participants associated 'Emotional,' 'Physical' and 'Organizational' dimensions to the sport event image, while spectators most often mentioned 'Social' and 'Historical' dimensions. Papadimitriou et al. (2016) studied the Universiade – the world's second greatest multi-sport event after the Olympic Games and also identified five core dimensions: 'Competition,' 'Emotional,' 'Social,' 'Cultural' and 'Organizational.' The dimensions identified in the studies above included cognitive as well as affective perceptions (Kaplanidou, 2010, p. 383) that can be clarified further by identifying the words participants used to describe them. For instance, the 'Emotional' dimension has been described by words such as excitement, fulfilment, and joy and the 'Physical' dimension has been associated with health, exercise, and training (Kaplanidou, 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2016).

In summary, 'sport event image' is different from, but influenced by, destination image (s). It can be operationalised by a set of key dimensions describing important aspects of the event. Previous identified dimensions, that we use as a point of departure in this study to investigate the event image of northern, winter endurance events are; 'Organizational,' 'Environmental,' 'Physical,' 'Social' and 'Emotional' (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010), 'Historical' (Kaplanidou, 2010), 'Competition' and 'Cultural' (Papadimitriou et al., 2016).

Methods

Events: Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet

Birkebeinerrennet (The Birkebeiner Race, in short 'Birken') and Vasaloppet (The Vasa Race, 'Vasan') are long-distance endurance cross-country skiing events, well known across Scandinavia. They have many similarities and operate generally in the same markets. They gather relatively large numbers of spectators, amateur participants and elite athletes participating in parallel (both are part of the Visma Ski Classics race circuit). The amateur participants make up the most important market segments, commercially. According to the previous definition of 'sport events' (Getz, 2005), the Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet are outdoor, land (snow) based, annual, regular, scheduled events and occur at fixed locations. They are also what Getz (2005) describes as 'periodic hallmark events'. They both have strong ties to important historical occurrences for Norway and Sweden. 'Birken' symbolises the year 1205 evacuation of then two-year-old Prince Haakon Haakonson to safety from enemy groups through a dramatic skiing expedition where the stamina and skills of the rescuing soldiers crossed the mountains where the race occurs today. 'Vasan' symbolises Gustav Eriksson's escape from Danish soldiers in year 1521. He later became king of Sweden under the name 'Gustav Vasa'. The escape between Mora and Sälen, where the race takes place, is thus an important symbol for the foundation of Sweden as a nation.

Birkebeinerrennet stretches over 54 kilometres from Rena to Lillehammer and features a significant altitude difference and climbs two mountains. The event is regularly held on a Saturday in mid-March. After being sold out in both 2013 and 2014 (upper limit of 17,000 participants), Birkebeinerrennet has experienced falling interest over the last several years with only 8650 participants in 2017. Foreign participants constitute approximately 20% of the skiers. All must carry a backpack during the race weighing at least 3.5 kilograms. The cost of participation is approximately 140 Euro (Birken AS, *s.a.*). From participant data, the basic sociodemographic profile is known (Id.mngmnt, 2014). However, we are not aware of research that have assessed the psychological aspects of the event.

Vasaloppet is considered the worlds' oldest, biggest and longest endurance ski race, held for the first time in 1922. It stretches over 90 kilometres from Sälen to Mora. The event is held regularly the first Sunday in March. A maximum of 15,800 people participate every year, and foreign participants from up to 50 countries constitute more than 20% of participants. For years, tickets to the Vasan have sold out, sometimes within seconds of becoming available online. The cost of participation is approximately 170 Euro. There are no equipment requirements such as a backpack or extra clothing (Folvik, 2017). The clearest differences between the two is currently primarily the stronger interest in participating in Vasaloppet compared to Birkebeinerrennet, secondly the different lengths and altitudes, with Vasaloppet as the longest and Birkebeinerrennet as the most hilly.

Design and data gathering

To reach the aims of the paper, a qualitative comparative case-study design was chosen. Such studies require relatively similar cases to permit meaningful analysis (Glaser, 1965). Qualitative methods using interviews with open-ended questions are suitable to measure holistic components of image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). The data collection took place at two similar locations and times: in the trade fairs in Lillehammer and Mora (key social happenings in both races) during March 2017. A table was placed in the trade fair areas in each event with a sign announcing the interviews. As incentives to participate, 10 free tickets to Birkebeinerrennet were drawn from among those completing the interview. In addition, all informants were rewarded with a pair of sunglasses donated by Birken AS.

The goal of the sampling plan was to understand how a diverse and varied set of participants perceived the event's images, so we sought informants from different ages, genders, and with varying experiences with the events (Table 1). We selected informants from the Nordic countries (primarily Sweden and Norway) and all interviews were done in Nordic languages, since they make up most of the participants, number-wise. It was voluntary to participate.

Interviews allow informants to describe key aspects of the events without being affected by predefined attributes, and such methodologies have potential to capture unique characteristics. The interviews were semi-structured and an interview guide was used to guide the interviews and provide consistency across interviews. A joint interview guide similar for interviews about both races was developed based on the research questions (Attachment 1). It was pretested on five previous participants in Birkebeinerrennet to ensure that the questions were relevant (Hay, 2000). Some introductory questions about

Table 1. Overview of demographic characteristics of the informants and what race they participated in.

Participates in ...	Gender		Nationality				Age							
	Female	Male	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Germany	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	
Birken Skifestival	21	6	15	14	1	6	0	3	5	4	4	3	1	1
Vasaloppets Vintervecka	31	8	23	2	27	1	1	4	9	7	6	4	1	0
Total	52	52	52	52				52						

demographic variables and informant's former experiences with endurance ski events were first asked, followed by more personal, open-ended and content-focused questions about the images of the events.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Participants were assured that their responses would be aggregated for purposes of analysis, and their anonymity to be secured. Selected quotations from respondents used in this manuscript were translated into English by the authors, and blindly retranslated back the original language by colleagues of the authors to ensure that original meanings were kept.

A total of 52 interviews were collected, and theoretical data saturation was achieved since additional interviews did not provide more information but more and more confirmed others. The interviews constituted of a mix of longer (max length 21:20 min, average 9:40 min), and shorter (min length 2:04 min, average length 4:30 min). A higher number of longer in-depth interviews were originally planned for, but it turned out to be difficult to conduct these for all, because several informants were in a hurry with little time for long in-depth interviews. Though the interviews varied in their level of detail, all main themes in the interview guide were covered in every interview. Longer interviews contained the most detailed information, but the shorter ones yielded important supporting details for the findings in the longer interviews and reflected the images that most easily came to mind.

Analysis

The transcriptions were printed out, sorted and given IDs according to which race they came from, what race the informant had participated in, and then read several times. First, they were read in full to gain an overview of the material. Then, the data were analysed using the Constant Comparison Method (Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Glaser, 1965) which is known for coding and analysing material at the same time. Concepts and frameworks will emerge through constant comparisons of the material (Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Glaser, 1965). After having conducted some analyses, it was clear that dimensions clearly echoed dimensions previously identified in the literature (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). However, novel dimensions were also identified. As such, the analyses began as an inductive and open perspective and then shifted to a more deductive approach combined with a continuous and active search for novel dimensions.

After identification of all relevant image dimensions, more insight about the ways informants interpreted the properties of each dimension was sought. This illustrates the second step of the analysis which, according to Glaser (1965), can be exemplified by the dimension named 'Historical', which was used to describe two distinct aspects of history: the fact that the races were historical in terms of being arranged for almost 100 years, but also the wider national-historical meanings the events had. Quotations were selected to illustrate and document key findings. To ensure that this could be tracked back to the raw data, they were coded with an ID, for example, 'B1' (representing the first interviewed informant from Birkebeinerrennet).

Validity and reliability

That we tested the interview guide, in addition to the obtained variation in age, gender and nationality, strengthened the validity and reliability of this study. We combined a

Glaserian (Glaser 1965) and a Straussian (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) approach in the analysis, meaning that we from the start had a very open approach to data, and then, as this linked well to previous frameworks and concepts, followed a more structured and partly predefined approach. Though based on the same interview guide, interviewers tailored questions to suit the experience of each interview participant and their available time to participate in the interview. For example, some questions about the races were not asked if the respondent had not attended the current race in previous years, and some details were missed if the participant did not have time to sufficiently elaborate their interpretation of the different event dimensions. We actively mitigated this shortcoming by conducting a higher number of interviews than originally were planned.

Results

Sample characteristics

Informants from both events were typically males in their mid-40's living in Norway (Birkebeinerrennet) or Sweden (Vasaloppet). This finding matches previous polls of participants (Id.mngmnt, 2014; Vasaloppet, 2018). The informants' general demographic profiles are summarised in Table 1.

In total, 52 people participating in Birken Skifestival or/and Vasaloppets Vintervecka were interviewed. The majority of respondents were men (73%) and almost 85% were from Norway or Sweden. Overall, 34 informants participated in the main race of the events while 15 took part in other races in Birken Skifestival or Vasaloppets Vintervecka. Three informants were spectators, but had formerly participated in one or both. 13 informants participated in both events in 2017. 45 persons invited to take part in the interview rejected participating in the study, mainly because they were in a hurry.

Image dimensions

Several of the dimensions identified in previous research were found to be highly relevant for these events as well (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). In addition, two new dimensions were identified (Table 2). Informants with experiences from several races or both events often gave longer interviews. It was thus useful to contrast these with the findings from the shorter interviews, since these often came from informants with less experience. As such, the images elicited from the shorter and the longer interviews supplement each other. Table 2 therefore also presents how often the different domains were mentioned in long and short interviews, respectively.

Organisational

The organisational image was dominated by the assessment that both races were well structured and organised. Easy access to information before and during the races made it straightforward to participate and find your way around. The organisation in Vasaloppet was described as outstanding and as being at an incomparable level of quality in Europe: 'I have participated in several races in Europe, and Vasaloppet is on a very own level [*sic*]' (V15). Similarly, the logistics and how participants were treated after completion of the

Table 2. Identified dimensions, key terms and themes associated with each dimension. Words written in italics are novel dimensions and themes identified in this study. Number of informants that mentioned each dimension from interviews shorter and longer than 10 min.

Dimension	Words and themes associated with the dimension ...	Interviews longer than 10 min (N = 9)	Interviews shorter than 10 min (N = 43)	Total
Organisational	Organisational and management aspects, <i>trade fairs, logistic, entry fee</i>	7	29	36
Environmental	<i>Aesthetic aspects: scenery, sights</i> <i>Physical aspects: topography, terrain</i>	8	23	31
Emotional	Excitement, fulfilment, joy, <i>challenge, cultural identity</i>	7	23	30
Social	Interaction with other people (athletes, locals, fans), <i>crowding, atmosphere</i>	7	19	26
Historical	The history of the event, <i>events arranged for many years</i>	2	14	16
Physical	Health, exercise, training, <i>technique</i>	5	10	15
Competition	Sport, performance, winner and medals	5	6	11
Cultural	Diversity, culture, multi-nationality, <i>countries represented</i>	4	2	6
Equipment	<i>Equipment, skis, poles, shoes, backpack</i>	1	2	3
Destination	<i>Vacation, hotel, accommodation</i>	1	1	2

race was described as unique. The staff took care of their equipment while they were competing but also their skis after the race, and service stations were available during the race, which made participation less logistically complicated. It is necessary to visit the trade fair in both races, primarily for picking up the bib number. The distribution of bib numbers was described as taking too much space in Håkons Hall, which could be developed into a more valuable social arena by providing a more enjoyable atmosphere, snack bars, and some entertainment. The Vasaloppet trade fair was generally rated as a higher quality than the one in Norway. Also, the food and drinks after the race was rated highly: 'In Norway it's all about the sporting event, which is good, but in Sweden there is more focus on the total package, like this area [the trade fair] (V20).' The entry fee in Birkebeinerrennet was perceived as quite expensive (see Event Descriptions), partly because no additional goods or services are included in the fee. The fee was clearly evaluated in light of what the participants got back:

It will be interesting to see what we get out of it, how the service-stations are, the food and drinks, how well it's arranged. When you are paying as much as this, these things are important, so I can't answer before it's over. (B41)

Environmental

Originally, this dimension addressed aspects describing beautiful scenery, countryside, new places and the best of an area (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010). The informants readily described the scenery as well as key topographic features of the race tracks. From these findings, it was natural to divide the environmental dimension into two sub-dimensions: *aesthetical* and *topographical*. The first one included scenery of Birkebeinerrennet that was emphasised as a unique nature experience. The scenery in Vasaloppet was often described with a more neutral or occasionally negative undertone as the track stretches over several marshes and through forests and therefore lacks views and aesthetic variation:

You have the environment, it's totally different from Birkebeinerrennet where you are up in the mountains surrounded by beautiful scenery. I had a very nice day and the sun was shining, I stopped, took pictures, took videos; things I couldn't imagine doing in Vasaloppet, because there you are always watching the clock. It was not like that at Birkebeinerrennet. Birkebeinerrennet has beautiful views. You ski down a valley; you don't get those same sceneries in Vasaloppet. I think that was a big difference [sic throughout]. (V29)

The topography in Birkebeinerrennet was described as very hilly, difficult, and challenging. Vasaloppet was depicted as flat and less technically challenging, even though the track in Vasaloppet has a greater overall difference in altitude than Birkebeinerrennet: 'It's an easier track [compared to Birkebeinerrennet] ... It's almost flat! (B43).' Nevertheless, a Swedish man had a more nuanced opinion about Vasaloppet: 'It is a considerable distance. Everyone thinks it's nice and flat, but its not. It's quite hilly. Not to Birken's degree, of course [sic] (V5).' A Norwegian informant said his friends were considering doing Vasaloppet, but they perceived the track as so long (in time and distance) that they declined to sign up.

Emotional

The 'Emotional' dimension describes what emotional reflections the informants have about the race events (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010). Answers centred on meaningful personal outcomes such as improved self-confidence, deep motivation, a feeling of mastery, and strengthened self-esteem. The informants were also asked about what they think of when they hear the event names. Answers varied, with responses such as 'positive thoughts' (B42) and 'tough guys' (B49) about Birkebeinerrennet, and 'something positive and fun' (V21) 'exciting' (V9) about Vasaloppet. A socio-cultural connection to, and a strongly felt responsibility for, Vasaloppet as something utterly Swedish was also revealed: 'It is something very Swedish to participate in Vasaloppet (V17).' Vasaloppet had an image that tied strongly to Swedish identity in general. Some informants also exemplified how the emotional images could be highly mixed, for instance bringing in aspects of fear. As one participant said about Birkebeinerrennet: 'I dread the steep hills. Not the uphill, they can be hard, but the downhill can be very scary (V18).'

Social

This dimension has previously been described of 'socialization' and 'meeting other people' (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010), and the responses regarding the 'Social' dimension touched on similar and related aspects also in this study. Both races generally had images of providing unique atmospheres, which motivated the participants. A Swedish man described the wonderful cheering from spectators during Birkebeinerrennet and mentioned that someone had transported a stereo up to the mountain and established their own discotheque. In spite of that example, he claimed that the organiser has potential to capitalise more on the positive atmosphere, and that the race can be viewed more as an adventure and less a competition. Vasaloppet is characterised by having many participants and spectators, which contribute to making the event a great social happening establishing a certain relationship between participants and spectators: 'It is a great experience, the spirit and the atmosphere, so many people. So cool! (V5).' Nevertheless, many participants commented that the mass start in Vasaloppet contributed to severe crowding, which was mentioned as something negative because it created chaos and destroyed the tracks: 'Its greatest strength is that it's so well organized. It is also starting to attract more people, it's

become quite crowded in the tracks (V30).’ The sequence start in Birkebeinerrennet spreads out the participants and helps avoid chaos, which several interviewees appreciated.

Several celebrities and elite athletes of international fame participate in both races. The significance of their participation varied. It was most important for the spectators, and the fact that non-elite athletes completed was generally more meaningful to study informants who participated in that manner. Descriptions from the informants about the participants in Birkebeinerrennet often echoed the media stereotype images (Sæle 2011) – sport-fanatic men in a midlife crisis with high incomes and top jobs (see also Bordelon and Ferreira (2019)). Nevertheless, this image was also challenged: ‘It has a reputation as a posh race, undeservedly so in my opinion. I can understand why people think that, but I don’t agree now that I have participated a couple of times (B34).’ The friendly comradery observed between race participants on the bus to the starting point in Rena surprised another informant. The participants were talking together instead of treating each other as fierce competitors, a contrast to what was experienced in Vasaloppet. Such findings are interesting in contrast to the often-mentioned competitiveness in Birkebeinerrennet:

When I competed in Vasaloppet (...) even if we were doing it slowly, people were elbowing me ... It wasn’t like that in Birken. It was more like ... People were talking to each other. I don’t know, on the bus, in the morning. In Vasaloppet everyone was sitting quietly, on the bus to Rena people were friendlier. I was like ‘what’s going on?’ [sic throughout]. (V29)

Historical

Generally, the informants were well informed about the event’s historical bases, which was expressed in two ways. First, reflections related to the backpack representing Haakon Haakonson were mentioned several times in association to Birkebeinerrennet, which reveals how the obligatory backpack connects the current race regulations to the history of carrying the weight of a baby. Similar themes related to Gustav Vasa were described in relation to Vasaloppet. It was clear that history contributed to giving the races a character of being unique: “The story about those fighting through the snow storm and the son of the King [Birkebeinerrennet] ... The same with Vasaloppet, it also has the historical background, which makes them more special [events] than others [sic] (B38).” In addition, a separate, novel aspect emerged concerning that the events themselves had a long-lasting history, having been held for nearly 100 years. One informant said: “It [Vasaloppet] is an old organization, it started in 1922, it has been a tradition for a hundred years, it is founded in folklore, it has become a brand name, as has Birken in Norway [sic](V28).”

Physical

This dimension has previously been described with physical activity aspects such as ‘healthy’, ‘good physical condition’ and ‘training’ (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010). Being well trained was perceived as important before participating in either endurance event. An informant participating in both races experienced Birkebeinerrennet as the most exhausting:

The first time I did Birken I thought it was really exhausting. I thought ‘54 kilometres, that’s easy, I just did Vasaloppet two weeks ago, this is gonna be easy’, but it wasn’t! (...) there were lots of hills, so it was quite a different race [sic]. (V9)

The topography was the main reason why participants perceived Birkebeinerrennet as the most challenging race, both seen from the 'Emotional' and 'Physical' dimensions in terms of how fit and well-trained participants needed to be. Informants described clear requirements regarding technique: 'You have to be technically good to do Birken. That's the biggest problem. There are too many hills; you have to master the diagonal stride. In Vasaloppet you can get by with double-poling, you can't do that here [*sic*] (B47).'

Competition

An image of a competitive atmosphere was found in both events. However, the perceived level of competition differed between the events. Vasaloppet was described as having less competition than Birkebeinerrennet, which also acted as a barrier to signing up on Birkebeinerrennet. More people seemed willing to sign up for a race with a lower level of competition. Earning a medal and the associated level of competitiveness in Birkebeinerrennet was evident:

When I return to work, after doing Birken, all my colleagues want to know is if I got the medal. But if you return from Sweden and have done Vasaloppet, it's a good achievement just to have completed. There are big differences ... (B35)

Interestingly, an informant who had participated in both races had the opposite assessment: 'Birken is not as competitive as Vasaloppet (V29).'

Cultural

Papadimitriou et al. (2016) described the cultural dimension as 'capturing references to culture and cultural diversity', exemplified by terms such as 'diversity,' 'culture,' and 'multi-nationality'. Vasaloppet was often perceived as having more of an international flair than Birkebeinerrennet: 'In Vasaloppet, we can see people from all over the world, at least I have experienced that [*sic*](B31).' A Swedish man suggested that Vasaloppet was better known in Norway than Birkebeinerrennet in Sweden. A Danish informant was confused when he was asked if he participated in Vasaloppet when he said to friends that he had participated in a race in Norway. Similarly, some Swedish informants claimed to not know the location of Lillehammer, and how short the travel is from Sweden. As another informant said: 'I think that people don't know ... For me, living in Malmö, it's the same distance driving to Lillehammer or Mora. Many people do not understand how easy it is and how great the road to Lillehammer is (V29).'

Of an opposite view was a Norwegian-American man who described Birkebeinerrennet as well known in Alaska (Orr & Schneider, 2018): 'Most of my friends are Alaskan ... They also go cross-country skiing. Birkebeinerrennet is prestigious for them as well (B51).'

Equipment

One of the new dimensions identified by this study was 'Equipment', as it relates specifically to the events and how they are viewed. Sufficient equipment was described as important for completing both races, but interesting differences occurred. Equipment was described as overemphasised in Birkebeinerrennet, while it was claimed that some participants in Vasaloppet sometimes had equipment of lower and cheaper quality:

There are so many people using old Alfa-shoes and old skis [in Vasaloppet], and even wearing jeans, I don't understand how they manage to ski 100 kilometres in jeans, so many people do it. So ... with ponytails and ... so ... they look like bikers, right ... Many of them actually look like that, but some just want the image. But in Birken ... Now here it's ... People doing Birken have great equipment, they have thought through everything regarding their clothing [sic throughout]. (B47)

Some informants thought that participants in Birkebeinerrennet focused on the equipment instead of training:

People participating now are ... Extremely preoccupied with having e.g. the right poles, and if they have the right equipment and all that, they're hung up on it. The most important thing is if you've actually trained enough. A lot of people are buying everything you can imagine ... Honestly, it's totally ridiculous (...)! [sic throughout]. (B47)

Destination

Another new dimension was 'Destination'. This dimension deals with the relation between the event and the destination(s) where the races have their finish line. It was clear that Mora played a minor role compared to that of Lillehammer for the overall images of the two events. The informants emphasised that Lillehammer, a somewhat larger town with more tourism infrastructure, generally had much more to offer than Mora in terms of shopping, nightlife, and other activities. Birkebeinerrennet and Lillehammer were given credit for the possibilities of vacations in relation to the event. In other words, Lillehammer is more scaled to Birkebeinerrennet as an event, and can more actively capitalise on it before, during, and after the event. The relation between Vasaloppet and Mora seem to be one of an event much larger than the destination and its infrastructure, and therefore the opportunity for the destination to draw direct advantages of the event was more limited. The hotel capacity in Lillehammer makes it possible for most who want to spend nights in hotels instead of at temporary dormitories, which are needed to house Vasaloppet's participants. This was emphasised by a Swedish informant who participated in both races:

Here [in Mora] you usually sleep in a large hall. In Lillehammer I slept in a hotel. There are lots of good, cheap hotels. This [Birkebeinerrennet] should be understood as more than just a race; it's more a [total] experience [sic]. (V29)

Similarities and differences between the cases

The analysis identified some obvious similarities and differences between the two events. The informants were aware that both are historical and that they have been held for many years (Historical dimension). They were also perceived as combining emotional and physical image dimensions, well organised (Organizational dimension), and as having a unique atmosphere (Social dimension). Both races had images of having an international character (Cultural dimension) and a certain level of competition (Competition dimension). Nuances were identified within these dimensions. The organisation and logistics in Vasaloppet were described as outstanding compared to other races in Europe. Negative perceptions of crowding were mentioned more often for Vasaloppet than for Birkebeinerrennet (Social dimension). The fair-trade area was described as better in

Mora than in Lillehammer by those who could make such comparisons. However, the clearest differences occurred mainly in relation to the dimensions 'Environmental,' 'Equipment' and 'Destination.' While the track in Birkebeinerrennet was perceived as challenging and hilly and offering spectacular views, the informants described Vasaloppet's track as flat and less challenging ('Environmental' and 'Emotional' dimensions). Regarding the 'Equipment' dimension, the focus on equipment was described as more exaggerated in Birkebeinerrennet compared to Vasaloppet. The third main difference was Birkebeinerrennet's potential for more directly contributing to Lillehammer as a vital and attractive destination. Aspects related to 'Destination' were not described in connection to Vasaloppet, except for descriptions of Mora as small and boring compared to Lillehammer. The most prominent similarities and differences between the two cross-country ski races are summarised in Table 3. Overall, both events have strong images, though Vasaloppet seemed to have an image that appeal to a larger (primarily Swedish) audience and market than Birkebeinerrennet.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to contribute to the relatively limited research on endurance sport event images, a gap that other researchers in the field have identified as needing

Table 3. Similarities and differences in the identified event images of Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet.

Dimension	Common	Mainly ...	
		Birkebeinerrennet	Vasaloppet
Historical	The history, arranged for many years		
Emotional	Challenging, strongly connected	Most challenging	Extensively linked to Swedish identity
Environmental	Nature-based	a) Mountain scenery, rich nature, experience b) Hilly, scary down hills	a) Marsh and forest b) Flat
a) Aesthetical b) Physical			
Social	Unique atmosphere	Friendly relations, middle-aged men with high income	Crowding
Physical	Required to be well-trained	Requires good technique, more training is required	Double poling, long and tiring but less technically demanding
Organisational	Well organised, being taken care of	Trade fair area has potential for improvement, expensive entry fee	Outstanding logistic, service stations with waxing, great trade fair area
Competition	Disagreements about the level of competition	Focuses on the medal	Little focus on the medal, focuses on completing the race
Equipment	Some basic equipment is required	Good and new equipment	Equipment of more varied standard
Cultural	International character	Known all over the world, but lesser known than Vasaloppet, have unreached potential in Scandinavia	Greater international flair
Destination		Holiday for families, activities in Lillehammer, hotels, several tourist attractions and opportunities, great party in the centre of Lillehammer	Dormitories, few hotels, chaos in traffic, boring town-life

further research contributions (Aicher & Newland, 2018; Gwinner, 1997; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Newland & Aicher, 2018; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Earlier research has primarily focused on sports demanding man-made environments such as arenas, stadiums, or paved roads for marathon and bike races (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Consequently, this study contributes to a wider understanding of 'sport event image' by addressing images of winter sport events taking place in mostly natural environments.

Image dimensions describing 'sport event image' identified in previous studies (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2016) were highly relevant for describing the images of Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Aspects related to 'Organization', 'Environmental', 'Emotional', 'Social', 'Historical', 'Physical'.

(Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010), 'Competition' and 'Cultural' (Papadimitriou et al., 2016) were used extensively by research participants to describe both events. However, this study found that two more dimensions, 'Equipment' and 'Destination', were needed to fully represent the images of these two events. Our findings thus both confirm and expand the conceptual framework for what sport event images are composed of, underlining that sport event images are complex and consist of multiple dimensions. This study also shows that image structures have many commonalities across different types of endurance sport events, countries and environments, man-made and natural.

Nuances were also added to the interpretation of previously identified dimensions. The sub-dimension 'terrain/topography' of 'Environment' reflects the nature-based character of these cases and should be relevant for other events such as trail and road running as well as off-road biking. Another notable outcome from this study was that 'Challenge' is an important aspect of the 'Emotional' dimension as it was used by many informants to describe their emotional image of the events. Such feelings exist in relation to several sport events with physical (and/or psychological) achievements. It is thus somewhat surprising that 'challenge' is not highlighted more in previous research. Kaplanidou (2010) have mainly used positive words ('excitement', 'fulfilment' and 'joy') related to the participation in a current event when describing this dimension, and Kaplanidou and Vogt (2010) were focusing on the mastery felt when completing an endurance event. Such findings were also prominent in this research; aspects related to what emotional outcomes participants get from completing endurance races were found, but in our study they were clearly related to a significant challenge, that also involved negative feelings such as fear.

These findings also confirm that sport event images can be composed of functional and psychological image aspects as well as elements in the continuum between these (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010). While functional aspects are directly observable or measurable, psychological elements are harder to grasp and describe (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Descriptions of trade fair areas and organisation exemplify functional aspects, while unique atmospheres illustrate psychological aspects.

Echtner and Ritchie (1991) highlight the four components in the continuum between functional and psychological characteristics: cognitive (beliefs), affective (feelings), conative (behavioural) and global/holistic components. Such components are all found among the

dimensions characterising Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet; the dimensions named 'Environmental,' 'Historical,' 'Organizational' and 'Physical' reveal cognitive evaluations, and 'Emotional' and 'Social' dimensions can be said to exemplify affective judgements. Thus, according to the definition of 'destination image' (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007b), the definitions of 'destination image' and 'sport event image' are different, yet have several commonalities.

'Equipment' was found as one of the new dimensions describing 'sport event image.' Compared to marathon races (Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010), ski races require more equipment. The earlier researched bicycle race (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007b) is an event that can be said to demand equipment in the same way as Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet. Since Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet are different from previous researched events in terms of season, latitude, level of equipment needed, they also require more and other types of equipment. Thus, the 'Equipment' dimension is truly needed to completely describe some sport event images. This finding could be useful for future research on sport event image as the equipment aspect can both provide something to actively utilise as part of developing a challenging and meaningful event, but also act as a barrier to some market segments.

Kaplanidou (2010) Kaplanidou and Vogt (2010) 'Destination' was also revealed as a separate, new dimension of sport event image. While destination image and event image are not the same and can differ quite a lot even if events and destination overlap spatially, there is agreement that they influence each other (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007b). The identification of this dimension may not be surprising, but is useful to more specifically address the influence of the destination on the event image (see also Aicher & Newland, 2018), positive or negative. Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet are both what Getz (2007) labelled 'periodic hallmark events'. From a portfolio perspective, an immediate reflection is that Lillehammer can more easily and sustainably host, utilise and 'absorb' Birkebeinerrennet, while Mora is not robust enough to host and take full advantage of Vasaloppet. Another valid interpretation is that the organisation and logistical excellence of Vasaloppet with the extensive use of temporal dormitories instead of unsustainable hotel development is an example of how a nationally important hallmark event can sustainably adapt to small rural communities (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hallmann et al., 2010; Kaplanidou, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007b).

Conclusion

A substantial contribution to endurance sport event images was achieved through a qualitative study of amateur participants in two Scandinavian cross-country ski events, Birkebeinerrennet and Vasaloppet. More research has been called for to clarify sport event image further, and there is a general lack of studies of winter sport endurance events. This study confirmed and expanded on previously identified dimensions. 'Organisational', 'Environmental', 'Emotional', 'Social', 'Historical', 'Physical', 'Competition' and 'Cultural' were dimensions identified in previous studies that also were highly relevant for cross-country skiing events. In addition, new dimensions labelled 'Equipment' and 'Destination' were needed to fully describe these event's perceived images. Follow-up research to confirm the dimensional structure of endurance sport event images are needed, primarily through quantitative approaches.

Limitations and future research

Future research should seek to confirm the identified image dimensions and their relative importance and rating among different existing and potential market segments through quantitative research. Surveys applying Likert scales or discrete choice experiments will add more knowledge of the relative importance of each dimension and how they interrelate. This research revealed 'Destination' as a new dimension, and there is a separate need to assess the existence and nature of this dimension in other sport events. The varying length on the interviews conducted was advantageous because it made it possible to have meaningful interviews with people having little experience with the events, but also disadvantageous when informants did not provide all relevant information they might possess due to lack of time. Future research should seek to sample a diverse group of informants with people from outside Scandinavia, but also people with different kind of experiences from the races.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research received funding from the Norwegian Research Council through the research project BioTour, grant no. 255271.

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