

Article

Sports Tourism Sustainability in Times after COVID-19: Analysis of the Behavior of Participatory Event Consumers

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Abstract: People mostly engage in sports to participate in tourism activities, and it is therefore worthy of deep consideration why people are so enthusiastic and what their internal motivation is, especially in the context of the normalization of COVID-19 prevention. Consequently, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between self-expressiveness and subjective well-being from the perspective of consumers in participatory sports events. Methods: We developed a self-expressive model for consumers in participatory sports events based on the eudaimonistic identity theory, taking samples of non-local individuals who participated in the Fuzhou International Marathon in 2021. Results: (1) Self-expressive model assumes that a consumer's participation in sports activities is symbolic of their identity and status. (2) Consumers self-expressiveness relies on perceived difficulty of the activity, effort perception, importance perception, and potential for self-realization. (3) Self-expressiveness moderates the relationship between hedonic enjoyment and subjective well-being. As self-expressiveness is highly related to hedonic enjoyment, it plays an important role in personal happiness. Conclusions: (1) Sporting event managers should attach great importance to the formulation and implementation of self-expressive activities to enhance the events, encourage consumers to participate in competitions of medium difficulty, and absorb competitive alternatives or activities of different difficulty levels. (2) They should highlight the realization of the "ideal self" and pay attention to the skill-level training of consumers. (3) They should plan diversified target plans (entertainment, experience, or learning skills) to respond to consumers with different target orientations.

Keywords: COVID-19; event tourism industry; eudaimonistic identity theory; subjective well-being; self-expressiveness



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1. Introduction

Initially, tourism scholars primarily focused on large-scale sports events worldwide in the field of sports tourism. Until the 1990s, outdoor sports such as marathons and skiing flourished, leading to an expansion of research in this area. Thus, many explorations of the classification of sports tourism came up, including Gibson's [1] three-category classification of sports tourism: participatory sports tourism (active-based sport tourism), event-based sports tourism (event-based sport tourism), and nostalgia-based sports tourism (nostalgia-based sport tourism). Gammon [2] put forward a dichotomy that divides sports tourism into participation in competitive sports and participation in leisure sports. Regardless of the criteria used to classify sports tourism, there are large cross-country differences, but active participation in sports has become an important part of people's lives in all countries [3]. The number of sports tourism consumers in China was 180 million in 2004 with sports tourism accounting for 35% of the total tourism output value during the same period. The national sports population had reached 413 million in 2017 [4]. The total amount of sports tourism consumption in my country may reach 1 billion according to the forecast of relevant government agencies in 2020. In addition, sports tourism actually

completed an investment of CNY 79.1 billion in 2015, with an increase of 71.9% yearly in our country [5]. Moreover, the market size of the sports tourism industry increased by 15% annually from 2013 to 2018, reaching CNY 260.5 billion in 2018 [6], although the sports tourism consumption market in developed countries such as Europe or the United States has seen rapid growth, accounting for about 14% of the market. The popularity of sports in informal settings has increased significantly over the years, as evidenced by the number and popularity of participatory sports events [7].

Participatory sporting events (PSEs) are open-ended events [8] that prioritize participation over sporting results [9]. PSEs come in various forms and sizes depending on the program and the number of participants, and these activities have positive health benefits for participants. Studies have shown that participants increase exercise intensity and improve exercise behavior during the activity, with some remaining active enough after the event [3,8,10–12]. The intrinsic motivation of participants (health, skills, relationships, and belonging) positively affects their sense of achievement in participating and their autonomous motivation to continue being active [13]. Due to COVID-19, no contact and no gatherings have become a social consensus for everyone, and consumption expenditures such as traveling and gatherings have dropped sharply [14], and the demand for sports tourism has been severely suppressed [14]. There is a process of occurrence, development, inflection point, and then rapid decline and elimination of public health emergencies, which will leave a shadow on the psychology of outdoor participants to varying degrees. Even after COVID-19, there may be suppressed demand for sports tourism due to safety concerns.

Previous research has shown that self-determination theory, which focuses on competence, autonomy, and relatedness, is relevant for studying the impact of physical activity on subjective well-being [15]. Scholars have pointed out that the satisfaction of psychological needs, motivation, and well-being are positively correlated [16]. Engaging in sports activities could not only satisfy people's autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs but also greatly enhance their overall well-being. Eudaimonistic identity theory furthers the belief that subjective well-being is a combination of enjoyment and self-expression, and immersion in self-expressive sports could boost subjective well-being [17,18]. However, some previous studies were conducted prior to the COVID-19 outbreak of the epidemic, and it is important to examine whether consumers' motivations for participating in event tourism have changed in the post-pandemic era. Understanding that consumers regard participating in sports activities as self-identity and realizing the eudaimonistic identity theory of self-expressiveness in event tourism provide a theoretical framework for this study to understand how participants choose their personal participation in event tourism during the stable period of COVID-19 to cope with changes in the surrounding environment and individual psychology. This study benefits the recovery of event tourism after public health emergencies, and guided by the theory of eudaimonistic identity, a self-expressive model is established and developed that is suitable for consumers participating in event tourism after COVID-19. Our research findings have the potential to provide valuable insights for marketers and tourism policy makers in selecting appropriate sports activities within the tourism industry. By accurately choosing meaningful sports activities, they can effectively stimulate and tap into the untapped potential of consumers through sports tourism. Additionally, the inclusion of sports activities in tourism experiences allows individuals to express themselves and enhances their overall subjective well-being. These findings hold significance in academic circles due to their adherence to scholarly norms and logical coherence.

2. Conceptual Background and Research Hypotheses

A prior study indicated that participation in physical activity could enhance the subjective well-being of tourism consumers [19], supported by activity theory and self-determination theory. However, we propose the use of eudaimonistic identity theory, which

dives deeper into the intrinsic motivation and pathway for consumers who participate in sports-related activities to enhance their subjective well-being.

2.1. Eudaimonistic Identity Theory

Eudaimonistic identity theory deems that physical activity provides consumers with the opportunity to realize self-actualization, leading to the experience of self-expressiveness. Namely, consumers prefer engaging in meaningful physical activities that allow them to express themselves. Simultaneously, consumers also seek to stimulate their potential for self-realization through these experiences.

These activities are both hedonically enjoyable and self-expressive, but empirical evidence shows that they are closely related in an asymmetric relationship. Specifically, a significant portion of self-expressive activities are hedonically enjoyable, whereas the opposite relationship is not supported [18,20]. Compared to activities that are merely hedonically enjoyable, self-expressive activities tend to be more intrinsically motivated. Consequently, engaging in self-expressive physical activities leads to a heightened sense of subjective well-being or eudaimonia.

However, what psychological conditions promote self-expression in physical activities? Eudaimonistic identity theory puts forward four determinants: difficulty perception related to personal skill, effort perception, importance perception, and self-realization potential in participatory sports events. These antecedents are depicted in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.

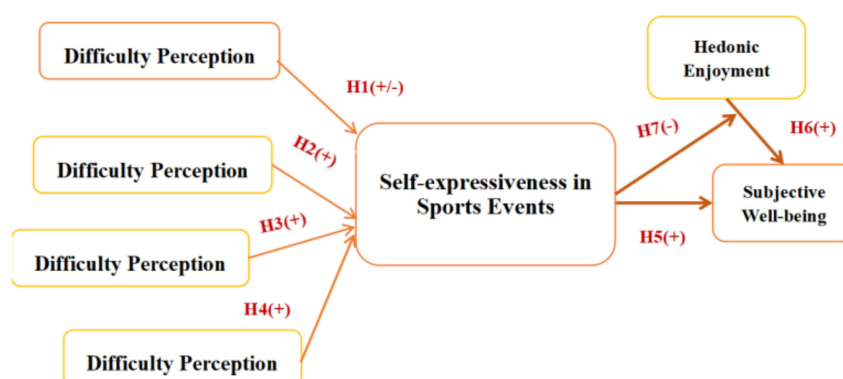


Figure 1. Antecedents in the conceptual mode.

2.2. Difficulty Perception

Previous studies have indicated that when physical activities are considered to be of moderate difficulty, they tend to be more self-expressive. There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between the perception of the difficulty level of sports activities and the self-expression derived from them. Individuals are more inclined to engage in activities that are motivating and present a certain level of challenges [15,21]. Moderate difficulty levels can evoke a genuine sense of immersion and fulfillment, allowing individuals to express their true self. Conversely, physical activity once deemed to be of moderate difficulty would be more self-expressive. Above all, the hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: *Consumers experience higher levels of self-expressiveness in physical activities when they perceive them as moderately challenging, whereas self-expressiveness will be reduced if the activities are perceived as either too easy or too difficult.*

2.3. Effort Perception

Self-expressiveness of physical activity is closely associated with the effort invested in the activity and the sense of challenged experienced [22–24]. Physical activity requires lots of effort to complete. Participants regard it as challenging and more intrinsic to

engage in it [21]. Hence, the consumers' effort perception involved in physical activities may contribute to their self-expressiveness during these activities. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Consumers who perceive a physical activity as requiring more effort will exhibit higher levels of self-expressiveness, whereas self-expressiveness will be reduced when the activity is perceived as effortless.*

2.4. Importance Perception

The perception of the importance of individual activities also affects self-expressiveness. Specially, consumers believe that participating in participatory sports events is important, which motivates them to engage more. Activities that align with an individuals' goals further promote self-expressiveness [21]. In the context of sports tourism, if a tourist believes that physical activities do not provide important benefits toward their goals, they may not consider them to be self-expressive. Above all, the hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 3: *Tourists experience higher levels of self-expressiveness during participatory sports events when they regard them as important, whereas self-expressiveness will be lower when the events are considered as unimportant.*

2.5. Self-Realization Potential Perception

Once people believe it would provide a chance for self-realization, they perceived physical activity as self-expressive. This occurs when the activity aligns with their ideal self-concept, and participation in the activity facilitates the transformation of their actual self into the ideal state. Reducing the gap between actual self and ideal self, individuals can achieve "self-realization" or "self-actualization" [24]. Once physical activities have the potential to stimulate self-realization, they can enhance participants' self-expressiveness [18]. As far as sports tourism is concerned, we believe that the physical activities that consumers participate in and effectively motivate them to realize their potential have self-expressiveness. Formally, we proposed that:

Hypothesis 4: *Tourists experience higher levels of self-expressiveness during physical activities when they believe them to have a high potential for self-realization, and vice versa.*

2.6. Self-Expressiveness in Physical Activity and Personal Happiness

Self-expressiveness in physical activity contributes to the establishment of eudaimonia and enhances subjective well-being [18,22]. Self-expressiveness activities have a positive and profound impact on consumers' life satisfaction, raising their baseline level of subjective well-being [21]. Moreover, these self-expressive activities provide consumers with opportunities to experience meaning, vitality and improved physical health, thereby meeting their psychological needs [21]. In terms of sports tourism, consumers who show higher levels of self-expressiveness during sports activities are likely to have increased subjective well-being. That is,

Hypothesis 5: *Consumers with higher self-expressiveness in sports activities will experience increased subjective well-being, and vice versa.*

2.7. Hedonic Enjoyment in Physical Activity and Personal Happiness

Eudaimonistic identity theory holds the opinion that hedonic enjoyment prefers to enhance individuals' subjective well-being in physical activity [18,22]. Positive emotions experienced through hedonic enjoyment could promote subjective well-being through a bottom-up spillover effect. The positive impacts experienced in specific events

(e.g., physical activity) could diffuse into all areas of life, enhancing happiness and overall life satisfaction. Above all, it should be reasonable to make assumptions,

Hypothesis 6: *Higher levels of hedonic enjoyment in participatory sports events are associated with higher levels of subjective well-being.*

2.8. Self-Expressiveness, Hedonic Enjoyment, and Subjective Well-Being

Lastly, we forecast that hedonic enjoyment plays a moderating role, enhancing its influence on subjective well-being when self-expressiveness is low. Once self-expressiveness is low, the association between hedonic enjoyment and subjective well-being may be stronger. A moderating effect emerges when self-expressiveness is weaker, and hedonic enjoyment has a greater positive impact on subjective well-being [25,26]. Hence, we wish that hedonic enjoyment were stronger, especially as the effect of self-expressiveness is weakened [18]. For this reason, another hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 7: *When self-expressiveness in a given activity is low, hedonic enjoyment has a stronger positive impact on subjective well-being compared to when self-expressiveness is high.*

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Procedure

The data were collected from participants in the 2021 Fuzhou International Marathon. The end of the competition was at the Fuzhou Strait Convention and Exhibition Center. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed to runners at the finish line by 15 volunteers using random sampling. Out of the 200 questionnaires, 151 were returned and considered valid, resulting in an effective response rate of 75.5%. The sample structure analysis revealed that the majority of participants were women (57.8%), nearly 32.6% of the participants were between the ages of 31 and 40, most participants (51.8%) participated in marathons 2 times per year, and the primary sources of information about marathons were WeChat and Twitter (44.6%). As a token of appreciation, each volunteer was given CNY 100 as a reward for their participation.

3.2. Measures

We adopted the four items proposed by Waterman [22] to measure self-expressiveness. Participants were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 to 7) with statements such as “While thinking of doing physical activity, did you . . . ?” then, “feeling more strongly involved with physical activity”, “having a sense to know who you are”, “feel more fulfilled or completely”, and “feel more special”. Higher scores indicated a higher level of self-expressiveness in physical activity.

We adopted the 2-item scale proposed by Waterman [22] to measure hedonic enjoyment (e.g., did you have an intensive feeling of enjoyment, and did you feel good during the participation of physical activity) with a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“absolutely not”) to 7 (“totally so”).

Subjective well-being was assessed using 8 semantic difference scales [27], scored from 1 to 7 with pairs of contrasting adjectives such as “boring/interesting”, “tragic/enjoyment”, “hard/easy”, “useless/valuable”, “lonely/friendly”, “empty/full”, “frustrating/hopeful”, and “tied down/free”, with respondents considered the following statement: “Please evaluate your life during in physical activity”.

The measurement of perceived difficulty, perceived effort, perceived importance, and self-realization potential perception was primarily based on the Predictor Measures of Intrinsic Motivation (PMIM) scale [18]. Perceived difficulty was assessed using 3 items, including statements such as “Describe the experience you had”, with responses of too easy/too difficult and do not need skills/requires too many skills, scored from 1 to 7 points of “very disagree” to “completely agree”. Two items were used for effort perception, “How much effort have you engaged in this event?” (1 = “quite low effort”, 7 = “quite high

effort”) and “How much time you spend on engaging in this event?” (1 = “quite little time”, 7 = “so much time”), and two items were used to measure importance perception, “Do you participate in Marathon contribute to the importance of this event?” (1 = “not at all”, 7 = “totally so”) and “Did you think participating in Marathon is an important activity in your life? If so, how important?” (1 = “quite little important”, 7 = “so much important”). Lastly, self-realization potential was measured using 2 items that asked participants to rate the extent to which the marathon provided opportunities for maximizing their potential and opportunities for progress towards important goals. Participants rated their responses on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 to 7), with higher scores indicating a higher perception of self-realization potential.

4. Results

4.1. Inspection Measurement Model

To assess the properties of the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement variables. The results, as shown in Table 1 ($\chi^2(8) = 11.5, p = 0.00$; GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.043), indicated that the model has a goodness-of-fit. The factor loading was all significant, and the CR > 0.69, and AVE > 0.54. All these results (Table 1) provide sufficient evidence to support the convergent validity and reliability of these measures [28].

Table 1. Assessment of reliability and validity of the measures.

Constructs	Items	Coefficient	α	CR	AVE
Perceived difficulty	Diff 2	0.92	0.71	0.88	0.79
	Diff 3	0.86			
Perceived effort	Effort 1	0.89	0.87	0.87	0.77
	Effort 2	0.87			
Perceived importance	PI 1	0.75	0.72	0.72	0.56
	PI 2	0.75			
Self-realization	SR 1	0.85	0.77	0.77	0.63
	SR 2	0.73			
Hedonic enjoyment	Hedonic 2	0.87	0.90	0.69	0.54
	Hedonic 3	0.57			
Self-expressiveness	Express 2	0.74	0.81	0.81	0.59
	Express 3	0.82			
	Express 4	0.75			
Subjective well-being	Happiness	1.00	0.93		--

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

To evaluate the discriminant validity of the measurement model, several analyses were conducted. First, the 95% confidence interval for the phi estimates were examined, and none of them contained 1.0, indicating that there is no perfect correlation between the constructs. Next, a pairwise χ^2 difference test was performed on all pairs of constructs. The results showed that the unconstrained model, where the correlations between constructs were freely estimated, had a significantly better fit than the constrained model ($p < 0.05$). Further, the shared variance among all pairs of constructs was found to be significantly lower than the AVE for each individual construct [29]. This indicates that the constructs have greater variance within themselves than between each other, providing additional evidence for discriminant validity. Overall, the results (see Table 2) provide sufficient evidence for the discrimination validity of measures, indicating that the constructs are distinct and not highly correlated with each other.

Table 2. Correlations among constructs (Phi Matrix).

	Marathon Sample						
	a	b	c	d	e	f	g
a. Perceived difficulty	1						
b. Perceived effort	0.13	1					
c. Perceived importance	0.12	0.65	1				
d. Self-realization potential	0.05	0.57	0.68	1			
e. Hedonic enjoyment	0.10	0.43	0.61	0.72	1		
f. Self-expressiveness	−0.06	0.42	0.57	0.68	0.75	1	
g. Subjective well-being	0.18	0.19	0.31	0.11	0.11	0.12	1

4.2. Hypotheses Tests

We assumed that if consumers participated in moderately challenged physical activities, the self-expressiveness would be high. To examine the inverted U-shaped relationship, we classify the difficulty perception variable into three categories through a 7-point scale with a tertiary split: easy (scores 1 to 3.5), challenging (3.6–5.5), and quite difficult (5.6–7). In one-way ANOVA, difficulty perception was independent variable, and self-expressiveness was considered as the dependent variable, with the results presented in Table 3, and we plot the results in Figure 2. For that, we confirmed difficulty perception is significantly related to self-expressiveness ($F = 1.15$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with the assumed curvilinear relationship that self-expressiveness is highest in challenges of middle difficulty rather than in challenges of low or high difficulty. Thus, we support Hypothesis 1. Additionally, path analysis was conducted to examine the remaining main effects, as shown in Figure 2 and Table 4. The results provide further insights into the relationship among the variables and their effects on self-expressiveness.

Table 3. ANOVA results: perceived difficulty and self-expressiveness.

Self-Expressiveness	Perceived Difficulty			
	Easy	Challenging	Very Difficult	
	4.15(0.17), $n = 36$	4.88 (0.10), $n = 99$	4.34 (0.26), $n = 16$	$F(2, 148) = 3.44$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 0.083$

Note: ANOVA = analysis of variance.

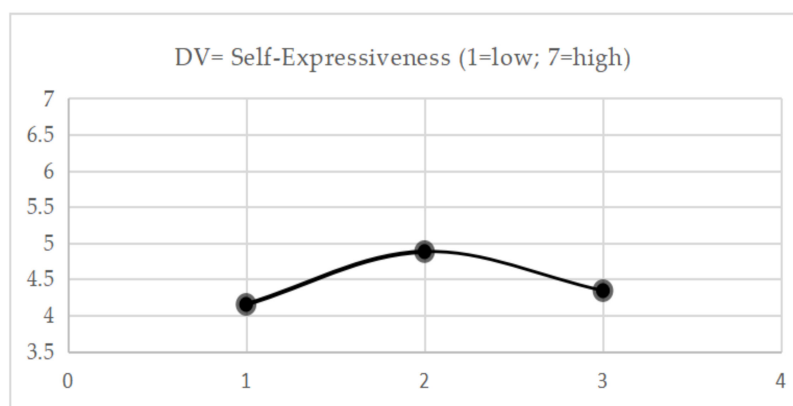
**Figure 2.** Relationship of perceived difficulty and self-expressiveness.

Table 4. Path analysis results.

Structural Relationship	Estimate
Hypothesis 1: Difficulty perception → Self-expressiveness	−0.05 **
Hypothesis 2: Effort perception → Self-expressiveness	0.13
Hypothesis 3: Importance perception → Self-expressiveness	0.59 **
Hypothesis 4: Self-realization potential → Self-expressiveness	0.28 **
Hypothesis 5: Self-expressiveness → Subjective well-being	0.61 **
Hypothesis 6: Hedonic enjoyment → Subjective well-being	0.16 **

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

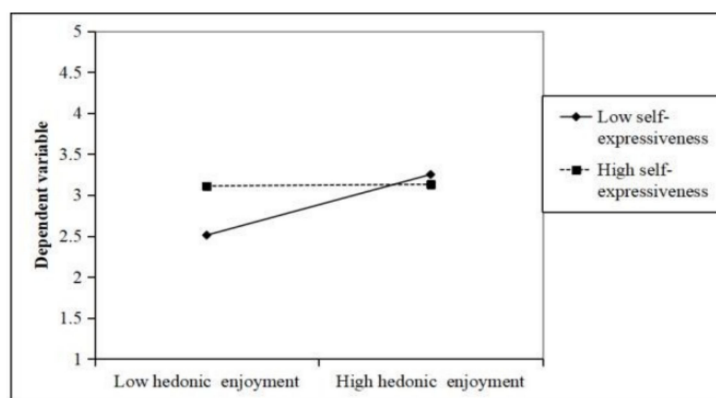
Although we anticipated that the perception of effort of consumers to participate in participatory sports events would have a positive and predictive effect on self-expressiveness, the outcomes show that the predictions in marathon events were not significant (estimate = 0.12, $p > 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 should be rejected. In contrast, we stand by Hypothesis 3, as consumers perceived physical activity as important, which has a positive impact on self-expressiveness. Specifically, for a marathon, the importance of perception is a key predictor of expressiveness (estimate = 0.49, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, for Hypothesis 4, which suggests that self-realization's potential perception has a positive impact on self-expressiveness, the findings supported the hypothesis. Self-realization potential was found to be a key predictor of self-expressiveness in marathons (estimate = 0.54, $p < 0.05$). Regarding Hypothesis 6, which proposes that hedonic enjoyment has a positive impact on subjective well-being, the findings were consistent with the hypothesis. Hedonic enjoyment was found to have a significant positive impact on subjective well-being (estimate = 0.35, $p < 0.05$), supporting the idea that higher hedonic enjoyment leads to higher personal happiness.

Ultimately, as for Hypothesis 7, we proposed that when self-expressiveness is low, hedonic enjoyment had a greater impact on subjective well-being. To examine the moderation effect, hierarchical regression analysis was used. As shown in Table 5, the interaction of hedonic enjoyment and self-expressiveness has an important impact on subjective well-being ($F = 1.76$, $p < 0.05$). In terms of the main effect, hedonic enjoyment has a significant power for subjective well-being ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that the higher hedonic enjoyment, the higher personal happiness. Self-expressiveness has power for subjective well-being ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$), showing that when self-expressiveness is high, subjective well-being would also be high. The interaction of consumer hedonic enjoyment and self-expressiveness in participatory sports events could effectively promote consumers' subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.18$, $p < 0.05$), which could be seen in the plot interaction diagram (Figure 3). The results of ANOVA confirmed that hedonic enjoyment and self-expressiveness had a significant interaction influence on subjective well-being. Once self-expressiveness was low in physical activity, the effect of hedonic enjoyment on subjective well-being would increase significantly. Thus, Hypothesis 7 is supported.

Table 5. Effect of self-expressiveness and hedonic enjoyment on personal happiness.

	Personal Happiness	
	ΔR^2	β
<i>Step 1</i>	0.23 **	
Hedonic Enjoyment		0.11 *
Self-expressiveness		0.16 **
<i>Step 2</i>	0.02 **	
Hedonic Enjoyment		0.19 *
Self-expressiveness		0.12 *
Interaction		
Hedonic Enjoyment*Self-expressiveness		−0.18 **
Total R^2	0.25 **	
N	151	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. SE = self-expressiveness with the sport activity; HE = hedonic enjoyment with sport activity.

**Figure 3.** Interaction effect of self-expressiveness and hedonic enjoyment (HE) on subjective well-being happiness.

5. Discussion

Data in this study provide compelling evidence for the research model, indicating that self-expressiveness in participatory sports events is predicted by difficulty perception, effort perception, importance perception, and the potential for self-realization. This study demonstrates that self-expressiveness has a positive and predictable impact on consumers' hedonic enjoyment and subjective well-being, especially in the context of sports events. Furthermore, this study highlights the moderating role of self-expressiveness in the relationship between consumer hedonic enjoyment and subjective well-being. The findings indicate that self-expressiveness is more pronounced among marathon participants who perceive the event as challenging. However, it is important to acknowledge that this pattern may not be applicable to all physical activities [30]. Further research is needed to explore the factors and circumstances that can potentially reduce the association between difficulty perception and self-expressiveness. For instance, the presence of a partner or group, where one individual may be a marathon enthusiasts while others may not be interested, could influence the relationship. Moreover, it is crucial to consider the skill levels of both participants and their partners in understanding the dynamics of self-expressiveness.

Consistent with previous studies, these research results provide strong evidence for the positive impact of the importance of perception and self-realization potential in participatory sports events. The findings of this study exactly match the following observations that the importance perception in physical activity (Hypothesis 3) and the potential for consumers self-realization (Hypothesis 4) have a positive impact on self-expressiveness in sport tourism. These results are consistent with theoretical eudaimonistic predictions and relevant to the findings of self-expressiveness [22,30]. Moreover, this study confirms that both self-expressiveness (Hypothesis 5) and hedonic enjoyment (Hypothesis 6) have a

positive influence on consumers' subjective well-being during a marathon. Consequently, the findings extend existing theories into the domain of sport and leisure activities in the tourism industry.

Finally, this study also demonstrates that self-expressiveness moderates the relationship between hedonic enjoyment and subjective well-being (Hypothesis 7). This indicates that participating in self-expressive sports activities plays a crucial role in enhancing subjective well-being, which is closely linked to hedonic enjoyment. In other words, the effect of self-expressiveness on subjective well-being is significantly higher than that of hedonic enjoyment alone and may even diminish the effect of hedonic enjoyment. This pivotal finding highlights the importance of scenic spots or event managers focusing on creating and implementing plans that promote improve self-expressiveness through physical activities, rather than promoting hedonic enjoyment merely.

Additionally, this study provides noteworthy managerial and policy implications. First and foremost, self-expressiveness could be enhanced by encouraging tourists to participate in moderately difficult physical activity. Marketing efforts should introduce a variety of activities with different levels of difficulty in sport tourism, emphasizing the importance of neither excessively easy nor extremely challenging activities. Obviously, when physical activity requires more involvement, self-expressiveness must be high, contributing to the potential for self-realization among consumers. Marketing communications should emphasize the need for tourists to invest a certain level of energy in developing movement skills relevant to the target culture, thereby highlighting the importance of physical activity and aligning the participants' real self with their ideal self. For instance, marketers need to hire professional marathon runners to teach skills, and encouraging participants to dedicate more time and effort to training can be promoted, with the promise that such activities could offer a perfect body and profound social benefits. Conversely, participants should also recognize the significance of the activity and regard it as an important event in their lives, especially if they aspire to shape their own image by participating in the competition and make themselves a healthy and active marathon runner. Thirdly, when self-expressiveness is low, the influence of hedonic enjoyment on subjective well-being becomes more prominent. Thereby, sport tourism marketing plans should aim to achieve two major benefits, financial income from sports tourism projects and activities which can be significantly improved.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between self-expressiveness, difficulty perception, effort perception, importance perception, self-realization potential, hedonic enjoyment, and subjective well-being in the context of participatory sports events. These findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of self-expressiveness and offer practical implications for sports tourism management and marketing strategies.

Some limitations of our study should be noted. The cross-sectional nature of the data collected by this study does not reveal the cause-and-effect association; that is, the effect of self-expression is not entirely caused by its antecedents (difficulty perception, effort perception, importance perception, and self-realization potential), nor can the causal relationship between self-expressiveness and subjective well-being be determined. As a result, only relevant recommendations can be provided. Further research should choose an experimental or longitudinal design to test the conceptual model to validate our theoretical claims. Moreover, our data was collected from a marathon, which could not completely summarize the findings of all physical activities, and the leverage of activities (e.g., exhibitions and concerts) should be considered for further study. Finally, we wish to continue research to study various scenarios and personality moderators to explain situations where hypothetical relationships might be stronger or weaker (e.g., the influence on the perception of difficulty on self-expressiveness that is moderated by skill level with a travel companion).

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) Sporting event managers should prioritize the development and implementation of self-expressive activities to enhance the appeal of their events. They should create opportunities for consumers to express themselves through sports participation, fostering a sense of personal identity and fulfillment. Managers should consider the perceived difficulty of the activities offered, encouraging consumers to engage in activities that are moderately challenging, as this level of difficulty appears to be associated with higher levels of self-expressiveness. Providing a range of activities with different difficulty levels can cater to diverse consumer preferences and attract a wider audience.
- (2) Emphasizing the realization of the “ideal self” and focusing on the skill level training of consumers is crucial. Managers can achieve this by offering skill development programs and training opportunities that enable consumers to enhance their abilities and competence in their chosen activities. By focusing on the realization of the “ideal self,” managers can enhance the motivation and engagement of participants.
- (3) Planning diversified target plans that cater to consumers with different orientations is essential. This can include entertainment-focused activities, experiential opportunities, and skill-based learning programs. By offering a variety of options, sports event managers can appeal to a broader range of consumers and address their specific preferences and aspirations.

In summary, by prioritizing self-expressiveness, considering the perceived difficulty of activities, focusing on the realization of the “ideal self,” and offering diverse target plans, sports event managers can create engaging and fulfilling experiences for participants in the tourism and sports industry.

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