Motivation and Demographic Determinants of Charity Participation at Sport Events

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Participation in recreational sports continues a strong trend of leisure and recreation in the United States. Twenty-one percent of men and 16% of women participated in sport activities on a daily basis in 2009 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010), and 90 million people participated in either running or exercise walking (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Utilizing these trends, many charity organizations have used running and walking events for years as a vehicle to heighten awareness and raise funds. A study revealed that more than $714 million was raised for charitable causes by runners and walkers (USATF, 2007). The Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure Series, which is one of the largest fundraising events for breast cancer, has grown to a global series of more than 140 races with 1.6 million people participating on four continents (Susan G. Komen, 2010). Charitable efforts through running and walking events are playing an increasingly critical role in our society.

Several researchers have tried to develop a broad understanding on why sport events are attractive to potential fundraisers. Filo, Funk, and O’Brien’s (2008) study of a charity cycling event revealed that intellectual, social, and competency motives along with the motives of reciprocity, self-esteem, the need to help others, and desire to improve the charity served to drive participation. Bennett et al. (2007) identified that involvement with a good cause and desire to pursue a healthy lifestyle are dominant factors to take part in charity affiliated sporting events. Scott and Solomon (2003) also observed that individuals make decisions to participate in charitable running and walking events because the events provide them with two meaningful opportunities; to be involved with physical activity and to show support for the charity. Collectively, understanding what facets of motivation influence participant behavior at charitable sport events is crucial (Bennett et al., 2007; Filo et al., 2008). However, there are few studies which examined what extrinsic determinants as well as intrinsic determinants induce to participate in charitable sporting events, despite the fact that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors can influence giving behavior (Sargeant, 1999). It also remains unclear whether there are any demographic differences between individuals who run for charity and individuals who run for the event. Event managers, as well as charitable organizations, would benefit from this information as they seek to satisfy a twofold interest of cause and sport among potential participants.

The purpose of this study is to examine what determinants are important for charity participation in sport events, focusing on participant's motivation and demographics. To better understand motivational elements, the current research utilized Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory as its theoretical basis. Because self-determination theory is the only major theory of human motivation that both acknowledges spontaneous, intrinsically motivated activity and pinpoints the factors that either enhance or debilitate that activity (Ryan & Deci, 2007), the theory has been employed by many studies in the domain of sport and exercise. Due to the nature of sport, most activities are intrinsically motivated because they are enjoyable in their own right. Conversely, extrinsically motivated individuals engage in a behavior in order to attain different outcomes. Therefore, in the cause related sport event where sport is playing a central role, individuals who participate for charity are considered to be extrinsically motivated because their primary motivation for participation is to support a charitable cause, rather than intrinsically-oriented determinants (e.g., enjoyment) inherent in the activity. Based on the above rationale, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Extrinsic motivation will have a positive effect on charity commitment at sport events.

In addition to motivational elements, a number of studies have identified how various demographic characteristics can influence charitable giving. Riecken and Yavas' (2005) study revealed that current and lapsed donors were older relative to non-donors. Other researchers have suggested that females (Mesch et al., 2002) and individuals who are married (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007) are more likely to give to charity. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of education (Edmundson, 1986; Harvey, 1990) and greater household income (Havens, O’Herlihy, & Schervish, 2006) are more likely to support charitable causes. Taken together, these demographic characteristics among charity participants serve as the basis for the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Older, female, married, educated and higher income participants will have a positive effect on charity commitment at sport events.

Data for the present study were collected through an online survey sent to 15,373 participants of the Philadelphia Marathon. The response rate was 15% with a sample size of 2,324 runners. Forty-three percent of the respondents were male, while 57% were female. In regard to charitable participants, 7.5% of respondents indicated that they ran for charity. Participant motives were assessed using modified versions of the Exercise Motivation Inventory-2 by Markland and Ingledew (1997) and Speed.
Chi-square analysis was used to compare the two groups, those who took part in the event to support a charitable cause and those who did not, on various demographic variables. The results identified that there were significant differences between the two groups with regard to gender, marital status, and residence (local v nonlocal) (p < .01). In other words, more females, singles and local residence ran for charity. Multiple regression analysis was next employed to analyze how motivational/demographic factors affect charity commitment. The results showed that charity commitment was positively associated with Health Pressure (β = .28, p < .01), Stress Management (β = .15, p < .01), Nimbleness (β = .08, p < .01), residence (β = .08, p < .01), marital status (β = .06, p < .02), Esteem (β = .07, p < .02), age (β = .05, p < .03), and Socialization (β = .06, p < .03). Charity commitment had a negative relationship with event satisfaction (β = -.08, p < .01) and level of education (β = -.05, p < .02).

The findings of the current study support hypothesis 1 which states that extrinsic motivations, such as Health Pressure and Stress Management, would play key factors among participants at the charitable sport events. Hypothesis 2 was partly supported from this research in that older people (over 40) have a positive influence on charity commitment. There was no evidence from the current study that females and high income individuals have a positive effect on charity commitment. Contrary to previous literature, single participants demonstrated higher charity commitment, and educated individuals had a negative effect on charity commitment. Other implications and future suggestions for research will be provided at the presentation.