Sedentary lifestyles and physical inactivity continue to negatively impact the health of the population. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2004) suggests that on a global scale, physical inactivity is a leading cause of major non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer. It is suggested that the impact of such diseases substantially contributes to the global burden of disease, death and disability (WHO, 2004). This issue is increasingly becoming an item of importance on the agendas of many Government departments internationally, not least, Sport and Recreation Departments (Robson & McKenna, 2008). Despite this trend, research in sport management appears to continue to focus more on elite level and professional sports, particularly spectatorship, rather than opportunities to encourage physical activity participation through sport and recreation (Henderson, 2009). This conceptual presentation seeks to bring together sport management, sport development and physical activity research, to highlight key overlaps and opportunities for collaboration. The outcome is the development of an integrated conceptual framework to be used to explore influences on sport, recreation and physical activity participation, and develop informed, integrated solutions to inactivity trends.

In an Australian context, Government funding and action has increasingly recognised the need to strengthen community sport and recreation participation, as a complement to, rather than a facilitator of, sport performance (Australian Government, 2010). With this increasing emphasis, Henderson’s (2009) contention regarding the lack of research emphasis on sport as an opportunity to engage communities in active behaviours, becomes more pertinent. Opportunities exist for sport managers to consider how sport can offer potential ways to promote physical activity participation, particularly in response to the rising prevalence of health issues already noted. Literature from physical activity and sport development domains, together, offer potential for enhancing understanding and strengthening action.

Beaton and Funk (2008) explored the relevance of physical activity frameworks in regards to active leisure, noting the inadequacies of several models such as the Health Belief Model and the Theory of Planned Behaviour. In response, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) was explained as a relevant model to apply in understanding participation in physically active leisure (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009). An alternative model, the Socio-Ecological Model provides a framework for understanding a range of determinants of behaviour, including physically active leisure, and can be moulded and adapted to different situations (Lounsbury & Mitchell, 2009). The model also allows scope for action and intervention to be developed to support specific outcomes. From a sport development perspective, creating supportive environments is both a key input and outcome of sport development programs (Hylton & Totten, 2008). Consequently, the Socio-Ecological Model and community sport development frameworks provide a point of intersection between two distinct, yet related bodies of research.

Unlike the PCM, the Socio-Ecological model proposes that factors related to the individual, social and physical environments require consideration to fully understand physical activity participation (Giles-Corti, 2006). This conceptual presentation will demonstrate the potential value of this framework in sport management and sport development research, and offer an integrated framework that brings together community sport development and physical activity theory. This model offers a framework for guiding research which seeks to understand or promote sport, recreation or physical activity participation. It is particularly relevant when examining participation for community development purposes, such as health, wellbeing and other social motives.

This framework may be applied in a range of contexts. Initially, it will be used to explore factors that influence the cycling behavior of women. Cycling occurs in a range of forms and has a variety of purposes, including transport, recreation and sport. It is therefore possible that influences on participation may vary depending on the purpose of
participation. This can be said for different recreational activities such as walking, running and swimming, in addition to other forms of sports, which are increasingly diversifying participation forms, and may be difficult to clearly understand, using other models. The proposed conceptual framework will provide researchers with a theoretically solid, yet flexible structure, from which understanding and action can be developed.