The Influence of Ego Involvement with Running on Varsity Athletes’ Post-Collegiate Running Loyalty and Health

Luke Potwarka, University of Waterloo
Mark Havitz, University of Waterloo
Wade Wilson, University of Waterloo
Steven Mock, University of Waterloo

Socio-cultural

Thursday, May 29, 2014
11:25 AM

Abstract 2014-034
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(Phipps)

The leisure and sport literature on ego involvement (EI) with activity has been dominated by cross-sectional study, with relatively little attention given to longitudinal research. Snelgrove and Havitz (2010) argued that “this short-term perspective represents a serious limitation in the extant literature, as little is known about the enduring nature of these involvements and commitments” (p. 338). This research explored, using a retrospective approach with multiple temporally-based data points, enduring EI with running among a sample of one-time competitive distance runners. In particular, our purpose was to explore, while controlling for during-college EI scores, the influence of current EI scores with running on former varsity athletes’ eight post-collegiate (i.e., current) running loyalties and self-reported health. Current manifestations of running loyalty examined include four metrics related to running intensity (i.e., days run per week, distance of average run, average pace, number of competitions per year), four related to running preferences (i.e., favorite routes, gear, competitions and partners), and one metric of perceived health.

Stockard, Carpenter and Kable (2012) noted that “continuity and change in adulthood have long fascinated both scholars and the lay public. Some suggest that there are significant continuities in individuals’ personalities, perspectives and values, especially after early adulthood, supporting what has been called the ‘age-stability hypothesis.’” Limited longitudinal leisure involvement research has been conducted in that realm (Havitz & Howard, 1995), and none which was designed to test the age-stability hypothesis. Moreover, social judgment theory suggests that enduring traits of ego involvement influence activity choice by setting individual latitudes of acceptance and rejection which guide behavior. The present study is rooted in line of ego involvement research (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985) which stresses, in contrast to other research (Duda 1988, 2007), facets of personal relevance and has been extensively applied in a broad range of primarily non-competitive leisure, sport and recreation contexts (Funk & James, 2001; Havitz & Dimanche, 1999; Havitz & Howard, 1995). This choice was deemed relevant because a good portion of respondents, even those who continued to run post-graduation, de-emphasized the competitive aspects of their adult participation. We used a retrospective rather than prospective longitudinal approach in this research (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010).

For purposes of this research, EI is an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity and/or associated product. It is evoked by a particular stimulus or situation and has drive properties (Rothschild, 1984). Within the literature, this form of EI has usually been treated as a multifaceted construct including attraction, sign, centrality to lifestyle, and risk (Havitz, Green & McCarville, 1993; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). More recently, Kyle, Absher, Norman, Hammitt, and Jodice (2007) re-conceptualized the concept, arguing that centrality actually consisted of two facets, degree to which lifestyle is organized around the activity plus one related to social bonding, and that sign could also be separated into facets related to identity affirmation (or self-expression per Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994) and identity expression (self-presentation also per Dimanche & Samdahl). Kyle et al. retained the attraction facet intact and dropped the risk facets from their conceptualization largely on the basis of poor reliability over numerous data sets and re-occurring questions regarding construct validity.

EI was measured in running specific context using Kyle Absher, Norman, Hammitt and Jodice’s (2007) Modified Involvement Scale; three items each for five facets – attraction, centrality, social, identity affirmation, and identity expression. Respondents were 262 former varsity cross country runners’ from an American and a Canadian university. The average age was 49 years old (SD = 17.28) and ranged from 24 to 94 years old. Nearly seventy percent (69.7%) of the sample was male and just over thirty percent (30.3%) were female. All respondents over fifty-five were male as varsity cross country was not offered for women at those universities until the 1970s. Independent
variables included current EI facet scores. Analyses controlled for age, sex and during college EI. Controlling for during college EI in this manner allows us to model perceived change in EI from college to present (Cronbach and Furby, 1970). Individual regression analyses were run for each EI facet with each of the following dependent variables: average days run per week, length of average run, number of running competitions in the past year, running pace (1=slow/easy to 3=fast/hard), favorite running gear (yes/no), favorite running route (yes/no), favorite race (yes/no), favorite running partners (yes/no), and overall health perception (1=poor to 5=excellent; adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2001).

In support of the age-stability hypothesis, respondents who perceived an increase in EI over their adult life spans were more likely to remain loyal to running and experience higher levels of perceived health. Attraction was positively associated with days run, length of run, number of competitions, and health (p < .05). Centrality to lifestyle was positively associated with days run, length of run, pace, number of competitions, and health (p < .05). Social bonding was positively associated with days run, pace, number of competitions (p < .05). Identity affirmation was positively associated with days run, pace, number of competitions, and health (p < .05). Identity expression was positively associated with days run, number of running competitions, favorite running route, favorite race, and favorite gear (p < .05).

Directionality of significant relationships in this study was remarkably consistent: all 21 (of 45 possible) significant relationships between current EI and current running intensity, preferences, and perceived health are positive. It is also interesting that what might be described as “intrinsic” EI facets (i.e., centrality, attraction, identity affirmation) were most consistently associated with dependent variables of current intensity and health. The data suggest that sport and leisure services professionals and coaches working with adults should focus efforts on currently held intrinsic involvement facets, which perhaps remain the most stable over time among adults. By contrast, “extrinsic” EI facets (i.e., social bonding, identity expression) were less consistent predictors of running intensity and health. However, identity expression was the only current EI facet associated with running preferences and it was significantly and positively related to three of four examined in this research. These data suggest that gear manufacturers and retailers, as well as event and venue planners should pay particular attention to nuances of identity expression among adult runners.