Understanding the Triggers of Inspiration in Sport Event Participation Among Runners

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Inspiration plays an important role in motivating people to take part in sports. For example, the objective of London Olympic Games was to “inspire a generation” (Olympics Report, 2012). Inspiration triggered by sport events has the potential, although not automatically, to contribute to an increase in participation in physical activities. Even though there are many causal factors beyond the control of sport events that determine whether people translate inspiration into actual behavioral change, it cannot be denied that inspiration sparks people’s desire to participate actively or passively in sport activities (Ramchandani & Coleman, 2012).

There is a lack of literature that examines the concept and characteristics of inspiration under the sport management domain. However, psychological researchers have already made attempt to explore the construct of inspiration. Davitz (1969) characterized inspiration as involving enhancement, activation, comfort, and a feeling of being overtaken. Jones, Dodd and Gruber (2014) identified more specific feelings when someone was inspired, namely the feel of love and compassion towards others, the feel of pride about oneself, the feel of excitement, and the feel of driven to achieve. A more comprehensive study on the topic was conducted by Hart (1998), who found the inspired state contained four dimensions: connection, openness, clarity, and energy.

The nature of inspiration can be a hybrid construct that emerges from the position of two component processes: one is “being inspired by” (also termed as “trigger”); and the other is “being inspired to” (also termed as “target” or state of inspiration) (Thrash & Elliott, 2004). For the “trigger” part, literature discussed the source of inspiration can come from the external environment (Todd & Elliot, 2003). Specifically for sports, a study by Ramchandani and Coleman (2012) examined the features of sport events in relation to its inspirational effect on participation behavior. Results showed that five factors—the skill and ability of the athletes; the quality of the competition; the performance of the supported team or athlete(s); the whole atmosphere; and the physical environment in which the event is taking place—which were intrinsic to the events had high inspirational impact on people’s desire to undertake more physical activities. The overall examination of the literature demonstrates a gap related to the inspiration for behavior under the sport management domain. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to identify the triggers of inspiration for sport participation. Thus the research question of the study was: what are the most important factors/triggers that inspire people to participate in sport events?

To answer the question of this study data were collected from runners participating in 5 and 10 km and marathon races within a marathon event that took place in Greece in the city of Thessaloniki and also from runners that participated in a half and full marathon event in the Southeastern part of the United States. For the marathon runners in Greece, the web survey was initially sent out to 1,050 runners that participated in the 5km and 10 km races. For the runners in the USA event the survey was sent out initially to all 910 participants of the event. Response rates for the Greek sample were 45% (N=476 respondents), while for the USA sample it was 11.6% (N=106 respondents). The question on inspiration included two open ended question that asked the respondents: a) “Are there any elements, factors or characteristics of the running sport events that inspire you to continue be involved with running activity in your life? If yes, please describe them and explain why they are source of inspiration” and b) “What else inspires you to participate in sport events?” The responses from these questions were reviewed by three coders from the sport management field and were coded based on the literature in inspiration. The coding was initiated by the first coder and then validated from the second coder. Minor coding disagreements were resolved with discussion. The third coder examined all the themes for their validity and a codebook was generated where each theme was assigned a numeric code.
In total, for the Greek and USA events twenty themes of inspiration were mentioned by respondents. For the Greek event the frequencies per theme were as follows: environment (28.0%), health improvement (20%), event experience (12.1%), sportsmanship (10.6%), personal achievements, (7.9%), connection (7.9%), philanthropic cause (7.2%), challenge (7.2%), other people (6.1%), happiness (4.9%), energy (4.5%), event organization (4.1%), marathon itself (4.1%), dedication (3.7%), role models (3.4%), event image (1.1%), arousing (1.1%), special bond (0.7%), pride (0.7%), and event services (0.01%). When taking a closer look at the themes, we can identify the “triggers” and a “state” that illustrate different processes of inspiration. The “state” of inspiration includes 4 items: connection, happiness, energy, and arousing; while the rest 16 items belong to the “triggers”. For the USA event the following themes emerged: happiness (11.1%), role model (3.3%), satisfaction (2.1%), event experience (10.6%), competition (7.5%), environment (6.8%), other people (36.5%), socializing (4.4%), community (6.3%), event services (10.1%), Boston 2013 (2.1%), philanthropic cause (3.2%), health improvement (37.8%), challenge (16.5%), personal achievement (26.3%), age (older people doing it) (4.2%), way of life (3.1%), simplicity (1%), guilt (1%) and new destinations (1%). The themes from the USA event were mostly triggers of inspiration with only happiness belonging to state of inspiration. Looking at the themes collectively, triggers could further grouped into 1) event services and profile (e.g., environment, marathon itself, event services, charity features), 2) personal goals (e.g. health, challenge, way of life, dedication), 3) relationship with other runners and 4) personal and interpersonal emotional connections.

Taken together, the results give us a list of specific triggers for inspiration to participate in sport events and allow for the beginning of a more insightful discussion into the influences of inspiration in sport development. Compared to Ramchandani and Coleman (2012) the quality of the competition and the skill of the athletes did not emerge in our findings. Instead the event environment and the atmosphere were present and dominant in our results. In addition, the theme of personal and interpersonal emotional connections relates to the connection theme identified by Hart (1998). An interesting finding is that people seem to confound the “state” with the “triggers” of inspiration. For instance, people mentioned the enjoyment of participation in the event which indicated not only the “state” of inspiration as a sense of happiness, but also the event experience which can be treated as the “trigger”. The question of how to differentiate the “state” from the “triggers” needs to be addressed in future study. Perhaps, this can be solved by developing a new way to measure the “state” of inspiration, for example through the monitoring of the raise in blood pressure or pulse. With the wide use of wearable devices, this may be achieved by adding specific functions to them that measure validated biological inspiration indicators.