The Demonstration Effect of Hosting a Major Games: A Case Study of Figure Skating and the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games

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Developed by Hindson, Gidlow, and Peebles (1994), the trickle-down effect and more specifically, the demonstration effect, are based on the idea that performances of a host nation’s athletes will inspire the population to become active in sport. The Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games presented an opportunity for Canadian sport organizations to promote sport participation. The purpose of this study was to determine if the demonstration effect occurred in Canada, and determine the reasons why or why not.

According to Potwarka and McCarville (2010), “our understanding of trickle-down effects is not underpinned by any explanatory theory or model of health behaviour change” (p. 179). There is limited literature in this subject which utilizes qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as outlined by Potwarka and McCarville (2010). This research develops the under-conceptualised trickle-down effect subject by combining a mixture of methods for data analysis and collection.

The sport of figure skating was selected for this study. The reason for this selection is because figure skating is typically club centred and practiced within the club system, where membership numbers can be measured. Furthermore, the sport is accessible due to the number of venues available in the country for participation. While the cost of membership, coaching, and equipment can be restrictive, the availability in terms of the amount of figure skating venues allows the sport to be accessible to all, rather than a sport such as luge, bobsleigh, or skeleton.

This study used combination of mixed methods: both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) “mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher…combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches…for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (p. 123). Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, this mixed methods strategy allowed for an all-encompassing study in order to measure the TDE of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games. Prior studies on TDE in the context of sport have not used mixed methods. This study relied on both qualitative and quantitative research methods measures and as a result, this contribution to the field helped broaden one’s understanding of the TDE.

Quantitative data were collected from Skate Canada on club membership rates from 2003 to 2013. Results showed small increases in participation in the country as a whole, however there was little change following the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games. In fact, just three seasons following the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games, the number of figure skaters across the country fell to its lowest since the 2005-2006 season. In order to gain more insight as to why this may have occurred, qualitative data was also collected in the form of interviews.

These qualitative data which were collected at a provincial skating competition helped determine some of the outcomes of hosting a Major Games, such as the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games. Research participants included athletes, figure skating coaches, as well as sport administrators, with participants ranging from 10 to 46 years old, from areas all over the province of Alberta. Research participants were asked to reflect on their feelings and emotions following these Games.

These data showed that already active sport participants became more active, following the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games. Reasons included a sense of inspiration, motivation, and emulation that participants felt while watching the Games, within their own borders, especially compared to the recently completed Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games. Furthermore, research participants, more specifically coaches and administrators, briefly discussed some of the techniques and/or realizations as to some best practices to draw in new and keep current sport participants active within the sport.
The findings revealed that the demonstration effect occurred, however only for a select group of individuals, within a specific time frame. As there is no underpinning trickle-down and demonstration effect theory which illustrate a certain time frame, or a specific targeted group which is most likely to be influenced, the findings of this study outlined such a specificity (Potwarka & McCarville, 2010). Those who were already active in the sport, are likely to become even more active following the hosting of a Major Games, while sport participation can be expected to increase, however only for a short time following the completion of the event. Therefore, the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games were successful in increasing sport participation; however those successes were not necessarily sustained or properly leveraged to maintain growth in the sport of figure skating.