Positive and Negative Affect, State Inspiration, and Intention to Become More Physically Active in Response an Elite Sport Event: The Case of Spectators Attending 2015 Pan Am Games’ Track Cycling Competitions

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Abstract 2017-290

Marketing - Consumer Behavior (Elite Sport)  Saturday, June 3, 2017
Poster  9:40 AM
Room: Sopris

Hosting elite sport events are often justified in terms of trickle-down effects, which refer to an event’s ability to increase sport and physical activity participation among residents (Weed, 2009). For example, elected officials responsible for London’s bid to host 2012 Summer Olympics stated that the Games would be “the catalyst that inspires people of all ages and all talents to lead more active lives” (Jewell, 2003). However, social psychological mechanisms that might underpin trickle-down effect phenomena are not well understood (Boardley, 2013; Potwarka, 2015). While emotions are thought to be important for understanding behavioural responses to events (Madrigal, 2003; Zeelenberg et al., 2008), little is known about whether spectators’ emotional arousal while watching a sport event might influence their intention to participate in physical activities, either generally or specific to the sport on display. Emotions evoked by the event (e.g., fear, excitement, inspiration) might be linked with subsequent changes in either general physical activity levels (e.g. going to the gym, walking) or decisions to try the particular sport on display. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine relationships among positive affect, negative affect, state inspiration, spectators’ intention to increase levels of general physical activity, and intention to try the specific sport on display (i.e., track cycling). We explored these relationships in the spectator context of the 2015 Pan Am Games international track cycling events.

The current study employs the positive activation – negative activation (PANA) model of emotions (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), as well as Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) conceptualization of state inspiration to understand spectators’ participatory responses to an event. Spectators might experience generally positive emotions while watching an event, such as enthusiasm or pride, or negative emotions such as fear or nervousness. The emotional valence (i.e., either positive or negative) of the experience may determine behavioural responses (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Maroco, & Ross, 2012). Thus, we hypothesized that: (H1a) positive affect will be positively associated with intentions to increase physical activity and (H1b) negative affect will be negatively associated with intention to increase physical activity. We also hypothesized that (H2a) positive affect will be positively associated with intention to participate in track cycling while (H2b) negative affect will be negatively associated with intention to participate in track cycling.

We also examined how feelings of inspiration might influence physically active responses to the event. Inspiration can be conceptualized and measured in terms of three core characteristics: transcendence (gaining awareness of better possibilities), evocation (observing an external stimuli draws inspiration out of an individual) and approach motivation (the individual becomes compelled or energized to actualize one’s new idea or vision; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Feelings of inspiration evoked by sport events may lead to a participation increase in physical activities and/or sport participation (Ramchandani & Coleman, 2012). Therefore, we hypothesized that: (H3a) state inspiration will be positively associated with intentions to increase physical activity; (H3b) state inspiration will be positively associated with intentions to participate in track cycling.

Data for the study were collected from spectators (n = 306) of the 2015 Pan Am Games track cycling competitions. Individuals were approached at random as they left the track cycling facility and were asked to complete a questionnaire. Respondents were screened to ensure they had never track cycled before and lived within 60 miles of the facility. Five constructs were included in analyses: (a) positive affect, (b) negative affect, (c) state inspiration, (d) intention to increase in general physical activity levels as a result of watching the event, and (e) intention to try track cycling.
cycling as a result of watching the event. Seven items (i.e., attentive, determined, enthusiastic, interested, alert, excited, proud) from Watson et al.'s (1988) positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS) were used to measure positive emotions and another three items (i.e., afraid, nervous, scared) from PANAS were used to measure negative emotions. State inspiration was measured using Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) 4-item state inspiration (SI) scale. Consistent with Funk et al. (2011), three items were used to measure intention to increase general levels of physical activity and intentions to try track cycling as a result of watching the event.

After controlling for participants’ age, sex, education, marital status, income, knowledge of track cycling, and interest in track cycling, neither positive affect nor negative affect were associated with intention to increase general physical activity levels (H1a and H1b not supported). Both positive affect (B = -.118, SE = .135, p < .05) and negative affect (B = -.100, SE = .066, p < .05) were negatively associated with intentions to try track cycling. (H2a not supported, H2b supported). Conversely, state inspiration (B = .257, SE = .083, p < .001) was positively associated with intentions to engage in general physical activity (H3a supported) and with intentions to try track cycling (B = .621, SE = .092, p < .001; H3b supported). State inspiration was the strongest predictor of intention in both models, which explained 15% of the variance in participants’ intentions to engage in general physical activity and 50% of the variance in participants’ intentions to try track cycling.

Results demonstrate the important role spectators’ emotions play in understanding participatory responses to elite sport events. While the general strength and valence of the emotional experience (i.e., how negative or positive) did not explain intention to increase general physical activity after watching the event, feelings of inspiration were a strong predictor of intention to be more physically active. Interestingly, higher levels of both positive and negative affect were associated with lower intention to try the sport of track cycling. The activation of feelings such as excitement, fear, and nervousness may actually discourage some spectators from participating. However, those individuals who felt more inspired while watching the event were more likely to intend to participate in the sport of track cycling. Unlike more generalized feelings associated with positive affect (e.g., aggregated feelings of excitement, pride, etc.), an affective state of inspiration is goal oriented in that there is often a target object toward which the resulting motivation is directed (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). In other words, unlike being in an inspired state, people can feel excited while watching sport events, but not feel compelled to act in any particular way (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). We conclude that events which evoke feelings of inspiration may be more effective at facilitating post-event physical activity and sport participation. Research into what makes sport events particularly inspiring might useful for sport organizations that wish to leverage elite sport events to increase sport participation and physical activity levels in host communities.