Can Watching an Elite Sport Event Increase Youths’ Intention to Participate? Evidence from a Longitudinal Investigation

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The existence of a demonstration effect from live sport spectating has largely been critiqued as being minimal or non-existent (Weed, 2009). However, some scholars have suggested that a demonstration effect can occur in certain contexts when the sport is relatively novel in a community (Potwarka, Drewery, Snelgrove, Havitz, & Mair, in press) or when sport organizations leverage the event effectively (Taks, Green, Misener, & Chalip, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of our study was to develop an understanding of whether consuming a live sport event inspires new sport participation in the context of youth track cycling in Canada. Specifically, we sought to address the following research questions: (a) does viewing an event increase intentions to participate in the sport on display? and (b) what cognitive and affective mechanisms of the spectator experience explain any observed changes in participation intention from pre-event to post-event. Exploring changes in intention to participate from pre-to-post event is important because intentions have been found to predict behavior in previous investigations of demonstration effects (Potwarka et al., 2017).

This study draws on Potwarka et al.’s (in press) demonstration effects model which found that spectator’s cognitions during the event can influence an affective state of inspiration, which in turn, influences intentions to participate. Madrigal (2006) conceptualized the sport event consumption as a multidimensional construct consisting of: flow (absorption, loss of sense of time); fantasy (fantasizing being part of the action); evaluation (making value judgments about the quality of performances); personalities (focusing attention on specific athletes); aesthetics (appreciation for the grace and beauty of the sport); and physical attractiveness of competitors. Thrash and Elliot (2003) argued that an affective state of inspiration can be conceptualized and measured in terms of three core characteristics: transcendence (i.e., gaining awareness of better possibilities), evocation (i.e., the experience of inspiration is drawn out of the individual by observation of an external event or stimuli), and approach motivation (i.e., the individual becomes compelled or energized to actualize one’s new idea or vision).

The context of this study was the Milton International Challenge, a track cycling competition held at the Mattamy National Cycling Centre in the Town of Milton, Ontario, Canada. Prior to the construction of this facility in 2015, the sport of track cycling was inaccessible to participants in the region. By hosting elite sport events at the facility the town is striving to inspire future generations of track cyclists of all ages and abilities, thereby creating a track cycling culture and legacy. This study focuses on the attraction of one particular group into the sport (i.e., youth). A pre-event questionnaire assessing intentions to try the sport of track cycling was administered to youth in grades seven and nine a week before the competition. Researchers arranged to have youth transported to the event, where they watched athletes from around the world compete for approximately four hours. Immediately following the event, students were administered a post-event questionnaire. The post-event questionnaire once again assessed intention to participate, as well as cognitive and affective components of their spectator experience. A usable sample of 318 existed following both stages of data collection. Cognitive dimensions of the spectator experience (i.e., flow, fantasy, and evaluation) were assessed by nine items of Madrigal’s (2006) FANDIM scale. Aesthetics, personalities, and physical attractiveness dimensions were excluded given the novelty of the sport and ethical concerns. An affective state inspiration was measured using Thrash and Elliot (2003)’s 4-item state inspiration (SI) scale. Four items assessed intention to track cycle at each time point. All items were scored on 5-point Likert type scales. None of the study participants had watched a live track cycling event or track cycled previously. Change in intentions from time 1 to time 2 were first assessed using a paired samples t-test. Next, data were analyzed using AMOS to assess the fit of
the measurement and structural models. Additionally, a bootstrapping procedure tested whether inspiration mediated the relationship between event related cognitions and intention (i.e., with 1,000 bootstrapped samples).

A paired sample t-test (t=2.676, p<.001) indicated that youth’s intentions to participate post-event (M=1.92, SD=.967) were higher than they were pre-event (M=1.78, SD=.822). A test of the measurement model indicated good fit (X2/df = 1.88; CFI = .973; NFI = .945; RMSEA = .053, PCLOSE = .331). Furthermore, discriminant validity was established as the average variance extracted for each construct was greater than the squared correlations for each pair of related constructs, and the maximum-shared variance was less than the average shared variance (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity was present as the average variance extracted exceeded .50 for each construct. Last, composite reliabilities were greater than .70 for all constructs indicating model reliability (Hair et al., 2010). Subsequently, the structural model was tested and indicated good fit to the data (X2/df = 1.97; CFI = .965; NFI = .932; RMSEA = .055, PCLOSE = .151). Specifically, results indicated that intentions at time 1 were partially predictive of intentions at time 2 (β = .414; p = .002). The way participants experienced the event also predicted intentions at time 2. More specifically, flow (β = .209; p = .002) and fantasy (β = .238; p = .003) both directly predicted intentions at time 2 and indirectly predicted intentions through inspiration (est = .064, p < .01), and evaluation indirectly predicted intentions at time 2 when inspiration occurred (est = .045, p < .01).

Our results suggest that watching a live sport event can increase youth’s intention to participate in a novel sport context. Descriptively, the change observed in youth’s intention to participate suggests that watching the event served to alter youths’ desires to participate from one of relatively strong opposition, to perhaps one of being slightly more open to participation opportunities provided by the facility. This finding is consistent with the previous work of Ramchandani, Coleman, and Christi (2017), which suggested that major sport events are effective at moving individuals from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stages of the transtheoretical model of behavior change (c.f., Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992). Moreover, consistent with previous research (e.g., Potwarka et al., in press), our results suggest that how people think about and feel while watching an event are critical factors for explaining changes in intention from pre-event to post-event. Specifically, we conclude that immersive and inspiring spectator experiences, characterized by an ability to fantasize being part of the action play an important role in shaping desires to participate in the sport on display. From a practical perspective, our findings have implications for the design of event leveraging initiatives targeting youth spectators.