Social Capital from Sport Event Participation: Understanding the Behavioral Outcomes of Social Capital among Runners

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20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2018-215  
Friday, June 8, 2018  
1:45 PM  
Room: Sable A

Background
Studies on sport event impacts have increasingly focused on the social benefits that sport events can bring to a community (Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012; Taks, 2013). One important social benefit of participating in sport events is the development of social capital, which can potentially translate the temporary psychic income (e.g., the ‘feel good factor’) into the long-term impacts on event participants and their communities (Gibson, Walker, Thapa, Kaplanidou, Geldenhuys, & Coetzee, 2014). Prior studies have noted that sport event participation can foster social capital among event participants and between participants and spectators, volunteers, and event organizers (Sherry, 2010; Sherry, Karg, & O’May, 2011). However, a paucity of research exists in terms of the behavioral outcomes of social capital. Without explicating the long-term outcomes of social capital within a community, it is hard to justify the social value of sport events. Therefore, to better understand the role sport events play in a community, this study focuses on exploring the outcomes of social capital derived from sport event participation.

Literature Review
Putnam’s (1995, 2000) social capital framework serves as a foundation for the current study. His framework specified the elements (i.e., trust, networks, and reciprocity) and types (i.e., bonding, bridging, and linking) of social capital. The principle of social exchange indicates that people who gain benefits (e.g., social capital) from participating in sport events tend to form a sense of obligation to ‘return the favor’ (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), thus are likely to engage in positive event-related behaviors such as repeated participation, word-of-mouth recommendation, and volunteering in sport events (Inoue & Havard, 2014). Further, the reciprocity element in social capital postulates that people would give back to those who provide benefits for them (Coleman, 1988), underlying a mutually beneficial relationship (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). In this sense, social capital can facilitate reciprocal behaviors (e.g., helping and mutual support) between sport event participants. Finally, as the social trust and relationships (i.e., social capital) are strengthened, people tend to interact with each other more frequently on a daily basis (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). Therefore, as the social capital among event participants increases, their everyday socializations are likely to increase as well. Drawing on this discussion, we propose the following research questions:

Can social capital (i.e., bonding, bridging, and linking capital) developed from sport event participation lead to repeated event participation (RQ1), word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendation (RQ2), event volunteering (RQ3), mutual support (RQ4), and increased everyday socialization among the participants (RQ5)?

Method
Participants in this study were 152 U.S. running event participants recruited on MTurk. An online survey was distributed to the participants to measure the three types of social capital and the associated behavioral outcomes in the running event setting. Each type of social capital was assessed on a 2-item 7-point scale (ranging from 1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) which was developed from prior research on social capital (e.g., Putnam’s 1995, 2000; Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Stone, 2001). The behavioral outcomes were indicated by behavioral intentions, which included intentions to (1) participate in the same running event in the next 12 months (1-item), (2) participate in other running events (1-item), (3) volunteer in running events (1-item), (4) recommend running events to others (WOM, 2-items), and engage in (5) mutually supportive behaviors (8-items) and (6) everyday socializations (4-items). All these items were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales with acceptable reliability: the Cronbach’s alpha of each multi-item scale was above 0.7. The online survey was completed by 152 running event participants in the U.S. through MTurk. A majority of the participants were white (84.2%), employed (93.4%) male (55.9%), with a college degree education or higher (63.2%). The average age is 35 years old and the annual household income is $67,958. Data from the respondents were further analyzed using Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and hierarchical multiple
regression to explore the research questions of the study.

Results and Discussion
To assess the underlying structure of social capital measure, we conducted EFA which revealed a three-factor model explaining 71.74% of the total variance. Within each factor, there were 2 items with salient factor loadings (>.50). As expected, the underlying constructs of the three factors were the three types of social capital (i.e., bonding, bridging, and linking capital) that we intended to measure. Descriptive statistics showed that the mean scores of bonding (M=5.11), bridging (M=4.87), and linking capital (M=4.70) all exceeded the midpoint (i.e., 4.00). To test the relationships between the three types of social capital (independent variables) and six behavioral outcomes (dependent variables), we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analysis in which the effects of covariates (i.e., level of involvement and reasons to participate in running events) were controlled. Results showed that (1) repeated participation (in the same event) was significantly predicted by bonding capital (β=0.32, p<.05); (2) repeated participation (in other events) was significantly predicted by bonding (β=0.36, p<.01) and bridging capital (β=0.17, p<.05); (3) event volunteering was significantly predicted by linking capital (β=0.27, p<.01); (4) WOM recommendation was significantly predicted by bonding (β=0.18, p<.05) and bridging capital (β=0.28, p<.01); (5) mutual support was significantly predicted by bonding (β=0.34, p<.01) and linking capital (β=0.21, p<.05); and (6) everyday socialization was significantly predicted by bonding capital (β=0.38, p<.01).

Taken together, our study applied the three types of social capital found in Putnam’s (1995, 2000) conceptual framework in the context of participatory sport events. Among the three types of social capital gained from event participation, the development of bonding capital appeared to be the greatest. This was not surprising given that forming homophilous relationships (e.g., bonding capital) were far easier than forming heterophilous relationships (e.g., bridging and linking capital), because “birds of a feather flock together” (Lin, 2001; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Further, this study demonstrated the potential of social capital in generating positive behavioral outcomes with regards to repeated event participation, word-of-mouth, volunteering, mutual support, and everyday socializations; thus, it advanced our understanding of the long-term social benefits of sport event participation. Specifically, bonding capital significantly contributed to all proposed behavioral outcomes except for volunteering – which was only predicted by linking capital. Perhaps, compared to other behavioral outcomes, volunteering is more demanding in that it requires participants to have access to organizations and have the empowerment to actively engage in community activities (Blackshaw & Long, 2005). Since linking capital enables participants to build such access and a sense of empowerment (Grootaert, Narayan, Jones, & Woolcock, 2004), sport event organizers may want to commit more effort in building linking capital which, unlike bonding capital, may not be fostered easily.