Investigating the Impact of National and International Rugby Events on Canadian Grassroots Rugby Participation

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Despite somewhat conflicting findings in existing research on the ‘trickle-down effect’ of sport consumption on grassroots participation (Wicker et al., 2014), scholars have shown that frequency of participation in a sport can be positively correlated to increased media consumption of that sport (Muller et al., 2014). In addition, increases in sport participation have been witnessed after hosting an Olympic Games (Frawley et al., 2015). Scholars have suggested that, in order for this effect to occur, organizations should strategically leverage the sport event (Taks et al., 2017). It should also be noted that the effect has been furthered when the sport itself is relatively novel (Potwarka et al., 2018).

The Sport Commitment Model (SCM) has been used as a framework to understand individual motivations and behaviours associated with sport participation. Past research has shown that sport commitment has a positive impact on participation frequency (Casper et al., 2007) and can derive from social group approval and self-efficacy (Boardley, 2013), family support (Kay, 2000), sport enjoyment (Scanlon et al., 2003), participation opportunities (Jeon & Ridinger, 2014), and lack of involvement alternatives (Casper et al., 2008), among other factors.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that consumption of rugby events has on rugby participation in Canada. Despite recent success and exposure on the international stage in both men’s and women’s rugby (e.g. 2016 Olympic Bronze in Women’s Sevens, 2015 PanAm Gold in Men’s and Women’s Sevens), little is known about the impact of these events on Canadian grassroots rugby participation. The following research questions were posed: (1) to what extent do live and mediated consumption of Canada’s involvement in major rugby events impact participation; (2) to what extent does the gender represented in the major event impact participation; and (3) to what extent does sport commitment impact rugby participation?

Surveys assessing rugby participation frequency, live and mediated consumption of rugby (Wakefield, 2016), and commitment to rugby (Casper et al., 2007) were collected from 978 rugby participants listed in the Rugby Canada registration database. Participants were an average age of 33 years; 63.3% identified as male, 34.2% identified as female, a combined 5% identified as non-binary, transgender male, or female aligned non-binary, and 2% chose not to identify their gender. Responses were received from residents of all provinces and territories, with the majority residing in Ontario (45.2%) and Alberta (26.5%). Data analysis is currently underway and consists of CFA for the sport commitment measurement, chi square tests, and SEM to address the research questions. The results will provide insight into both live and mediated rugby consumption behaviours, factors involved in participants’ commitment to rugby, and the potential relationship between consumption and sport participation. This study will also contribute to existing research by focusing on a prominent global sport with relatively low participation and exposure in Canada. From a practical standpoint, the results will provide insight into how sport organizations might leverage national and international sport events to foster participation.