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# A distance-running event and life satisfaction: The mediating roles of involvement

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### ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of mass participant sport events has provided sport event managers and scholars with an opportunity to contribute to a broader conversation on ways to promote population health. Theoretically, these managed sport services should have the capacity to enhance event participants' well-being; however, the empirical link between event participation and well-being remains inconclusive. By comparing individuals who participated in a distance-running event with individuals who did not participate in the event, this study examined the contributions of the distance-running event, behavioural loyalty, and psychological involvement to life satisfaction, an indicator of mental health and well-being. Participants ( $N = 742$ ) were recruited from a 10-mile running event held in the United States. The results revealed that participation in a distance-running event was positively associated with weekly running activity, an indicator of behavioural loyalty. In addition, the two facets of psychological involvement in running—pleasure and sign—mediated the relationship between weekly running activity and life satisfaction. These findings provide empirical support that distance-running events can serve as environmental correlates of participants' behavioural loyalty and that the contribution of behavioural loyalty to life satisfaction lies in whether event participants identify pleasant and symbolic aspects of the activity.

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## 1. Introduction

Mass participant sport events, such as distance-running events, have attracted global attention over the last decade as an opportunity for organised sport activities. In the US, the estimated number of running events reached 28,000 in 2014, where nearly 19 million people finished US distance-running events ([Running USA, 2015](#)). The major running events in Australia, such as the Gold Coast Airport Marathon (24,214), the Melbourne Marathon Festival (24,410), and the Sydney Running Festival (26,886), have also drawn thousands of international participants, and these three events increased their number of finishers by 63% to 69% from 2007 ([Gold Coast Airport Marathon, 2016](#); [Melbourne Marathon Festival, 2016](#); [Sydney Running Festival, 2016a](#)). The increasing popularity of these events has prompted sport management researchers to consider whether

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organised participation sport opportunities could contribute to overcoming declining physical activity rates observed in society (Berg, Warner, & Das, 2015; Eime et al., 2015; Henderson, 2009; Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2013; Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2015).

This consideration broadens the role of sport management in society and establishes a link between organised sport services and public health conversations. Prior research reports that mass participant sport events have the capacity to produce physical activity related outcomes, including exercise behaviours (Bowles, Rissel, & Bauman, 2006; Crofts, Schofield, & Dickson, 2012), exercise intention (Funk, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2011), and running commitment (Ridinger, Funk, Jordan, & Kaplanidou, 2012). Event organisers are also considering how their events could improve participants' health and well-being. For instance, the Sydney Running Festival, which started in 2001 as a legacy of the 2000 Summer Olympics and contained four different distances (full-marathon, half-marathon, 9 km, 3.5 km), stated that an aim of the event is to promote health and fitness for the New South Wales community (Sydney Running Festival, 2016b). The Dallas Marathon, one of the largest marathons in the US, was also recognised as the official marathon of the city, and city officials identified that a key objective of the event was the promotion of health and well-being in the local community (Jamerson, 2013).

The recent practitioner interest in event-derived health benefits aligns well with sport management scholars who have called for more interdisciplinary research in order to legitimise sport scholarship and examine how sport could contribute to a broader conversation related to promoting population health (Chalip, 2006a; Inoue, Berg, & Chelladurai, 2015). Researchers have begun to theorise and empirically show that supporting a local sport team can contribute to promoting social well-being (Inoue, Funk, Wann, Yoshida, & Nakazawa, 2015; Wann, 2006). Participant-based sport event research has also provided promising evidence that distance-running events could promote well-being for a growing number of event participants (Sato, Jordan, & Funk, 2015; Theodorakis, Kaplanidou, & Karabaxoglou, 2015). A recent study by Berg et al. (2015) further suggests that community-based health programmes that offer hedonic rewards and social interactions through sport could lead to the increased level of physical activity and health.

Demonstrating that sport-related events, facilities, and programmes can produce health benefits would help justify public and private investment beyond economic impact justifications which are ambiguous and often criticised (Howard & Crompton, 2014). Evidence for health-related outcomes created from hosting mass participant sport events can also be used to support hosting these events on cities and communities (Murphy & Bauman, 2007). Unfortunately, the link between sport event participation and health-related outcomes remains underdeveloped conceptually and requires more empirical evidence.

For instance, a longitudinal investigation among participants of a distance-running event found that the event promoted psychological involvement, which in turn contributed to people's life satisfaction (Sato et al., 2015). The study is, however, limited because the authors examined the role of event in life satisfaction over a 5-month period using a within-individual analysis. This study failed to consider to what extent the event contributes to life satisfaction between individuals (e.g., comparing differences between individuals who participated in the event and individuals who did not participate in the event), which is key to advancing well-being research (Diener, 2009). Sato, Jordan, and Funk (2014) also reported that the level of physical activity had limited effect on life satisfaction after accounting for psychological involvement with the activity. However, the authors did not assess the potential mediating role of psychological involvement in the relationship between physical activity behaviour and life satisfaction implied by prior research (Elavsky et al., 2005; Rejeski & Mihalko, 2001). Although life satisfaction is not synonymous with health or well-being, life satisfaction represents a key indicator of mental health (Headey, Kelley, & Wearing, 1993) and well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Identifying factors that contribute to life satisfaction is critical to understanding what makes people's lives better (Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012).

For government officials, the overall aim of sport participation is “to get moving, to improve population health and well-being” (Rowe et al., 2013, p. 367) in the community. Verifying the link between mass participant sport events and life satisfaction would provide insights for event organisers and host communities into whether it is worth investing resources (e.g., money, people) in these events to promote well-being in the local community. To date, the relationships among event participation, behaviours and attitudes toward physical activity, and life satisfaction (i.e., an indicator of mental health or well-being) have not been tested in a single model. The purpose of this study was to address the gaps in the extant research by (1) comparing individuals who participated in a mass participant sport event with individuals who did not participate in the event and (2) examining the mediating roles of behavioural loyalty and psychological involvement in the relationship between event participation and life satisfaction. A mass participation sport event in the form of a distance run was the focus of the study because of its rising popularity as a population-based organised sport opportunity.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical foundation

This study uses the bottom-up theory of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004) as a theoretical foundation. The bottom-up theory emphasises the role of contexts, events, and situations in life satisfaction, positing that life satisfaction is derived from a summation of pleasant and unpleasant experiences through events in life (Diener et al., 1999; Heller et al., 2004). Researchers have used the bottom-up theory in exploring the influence of various consumption-related experiences on people's life satisfaction, including tourism (Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Yu, 2011), physically

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