

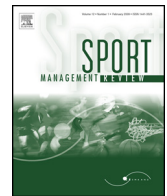


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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr



Challenges for sport development: Women's entry level cycling participation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 September 2014

Received in revised form 13 November 2015

Accepted 20 November 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Sport development

Women

Participation

Cycling

Social ecological

ABSTRACT

Sport participation is an issue of relevance to sport managers, yet it is an often-neglected area of sport management research. Cycling is a particularly complex form of participation to examine given its many formats, including sport, recreational and commuter cycling, and the multifaceted nature of the cycling landscape involving a broad range of stakeholders. In Australia, women are underrepresented in cycling participation and membership (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Cycling Australia, 2014), yet women show an interest in cycling training courses. The present paper explores motivations, supports and constraints reported by a group of entry-level female cyclists who participated in a training programme accredited by AustCycle, an initiative led by Cycling Australia. We draw on a health and sport development driven framework, informed by social ecological theory (Rowe et al., 2013), and suited to examining the issue of women's cycling participation in Australia. Results show that a range of individual characteristics, and factors within the social and physical environment, were perceived by study participants as barriers to participation. Of these, skill level, confidence, traffic/road conditions, and social support networks held particular relevance. Participants also discussed specific cycling barriers and supports of relevance to certain forms of cycling. Preliminary insights into perceptions held by a group of entry-level female cyclists highlight overlaps between cycling formats and indicate that conceptual advancements in the development of sport, and development *through* sport could be collectively considered in the context of women's cycling participation. Further research opportunities were also identified.

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1. Introduction

Participation is a primary concern for sport development scholars and practitioners (Green, 2005; Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008) and, thus, holds relevance for the discipline of sport management, yet issues of relevance to participation and the ways in which sport can be used as a vehicle to engage the population in active behaviours appear to be neglected areas in the sport management literature (Henderson, 2009; Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2013). Perhaps this is due to the

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.11.001>

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broad reach and application of sport development, evidenced by the diversity of outlets for publication (Rowe et al., 2013). Whatever the reason for the limited focus on participation in the sport management literature to date, a need and opportunity exist for scholars to focus on sport and recreation participation influences and outcomes. Such knowledge seems vital as sport managers grapple with changing consumer participation preferences in countries such as Australia where participants are increasingly turning away from organised club sport favouring more individualised fitness-focused pursuits (Hajkowicz, Cook, Wilhelmseder, & Boughen, 2013).

Cycling is a complex form of activity to examine from a participation perspective given that it can be engaged in as a form of sport, recreation or transport. Thus, much of the planning for, and many of the policies of relevance to, cycling fall outside of the remit of sport organisations and are the responsibility of governments and community and transport organisations. Sport development stakeholders operate within a complex context where activities to attract and retain participants indirectly rely on a multitude of stakeholders (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). While cycling is an increasingly popular form of physical activity in Australia (SCORS, 2010), only 13% of participation occurs in organised structures (SCORS, 2010). Between 2013 and 2014, Cycling Australia (CA) experienced a slight decline in memberships after modest growth (10%) in the preceding three years (CA, 2013, 2014). In this time, recreational memberships, which focus on non-competitive event participation, grew by 32%, and elite cycling memberships fell by 20%. Clubs report issues in attracting and retaining members while more flexible, recreationally-oriented forms of participation seem to be increasing in popularity (Sotiriadou, Wicker, & Quick, 2014). Importantly, cycling is a male-dominated activity in Australia with men representing approximately 65% of adult participants (ABS, 2012; SCORS, 2010) and 83% of CA (2014) members. Such gender disparity exists despite cycling being a low impact form of activity available to most people in developed countries (Bauman et al., 2008).

A joint initiative between CA and a cyclist safety organisation resulted in the establishment of a cycling education/training programme called AustCycle, which uses a licensee model to deliver cycling training to adults and children. The purpose of this programme is to provide participants with the tools they need to get involved in and enjoy cycling on a regular basis, with increased confidence and safety (AustCycle, 2013). Participants in adult-focused AustCycle courses are predominantly women (70%) (AustCycle, 2013), which is intriguing given that women represent a relatively smaller proportion of Australian cyclists (ABS, 2012; SCORS, 2010). The present study examines perceptions held by a group of women who completed an AustCycle course to gain an understanding of factors that motivate, constrain and support their participation in different forms of cycling at the entry level. The investigation seeks to better understand the issues that may prevent or encourage participation amongst a group of females and provides a context to explore an Australian participation issue from a sport management perspective. Thus, the present paper aims to examine perceived factors that influence women's cycling participation at the entry level, drawing on a health and sport development driven framework proposed by Rowe et al. (2013). The chosen framework relies heavily on social ecological theory.

2. Sport participation and development: a complex domain

Sport development systems exist to “increase the number of participants actively engaging in sport and to enhance the quality of performers in sport” (Green, 2005, p. 233). Two distinct categories of sport development are discussed in the literature; those being development of sport and development through sport (Houlihan & White, 2002; Shilbury et al., 2008). While both relate to encouraging sport participation, development of sport generally focuses on elite progression-oriented actions and outcomes, and nurturing talent to encourage elite-level success, while development through sport is concerned with the use of sport (and recreation) to achieve social development goals (Shilbury et al., 2008).

Development of sport has traditionally been conceptualised using a pyramid metaphor (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008), which depicts the movement of participants from the entry level as a junior, through to elite-level representation. Green (2005) discussed three specific tasks necessary for people to enter a sporting pathway and progress through levels of development. These include athlete recruitment, retention and transitions. Sotiriadou et al. (2008) examined sport development processes in an Australian context, highlighting that, from the perspective of national sport organisations (NSOs), three development processes are typically followed: attraction, retention/transition and nurturing processes. Such a process indicates that NSOs seek to attract young participants and develop a pool of successful elite athletes. These and other sport development models also highlight the relevance of less organised recreational participation prior to more formalised engagement in sport. Athlete development frameworks applied in Australia (Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissensteiner, 2013) and other parts of the world (CSFL, 2015) emphasise a focus on lifelong engagement in sport and recreation of relevance to health and wellbeing outcomes. In cycling contexts, participation is often encapsulated by recreational and commuter cycling, which are typically supported by recreational cycling and transport bodies, rather than by an NSO.

The body of literature which focuses on development through sport is commonly referred to as Sport for Development (SFD). SFD has been defined broadly as the “use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialisation of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution” (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011, p. 311). SFD relies on participation but for different reasons, with sport existing as a vehicle through which desirable behaviours can be encouraged, positive messages can be transmitted and social connections made. This definition also highlights the breadth of agendas to which sport may contribute.

The work of NSOs typically aligns more closely with traditional sport delivery and thus development of sport, yet in the Australian context, sport organisations are increasingly seeking to broaden their scope and participation focus through the

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