

# An exploratory, longitudinal investigation of the Theory of Participation

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## Aim of paper and research questions

Recently, Beaton, Funk and Alexandris (2009) operationalised the Theory of Participation (TOP) in physically active leisure using a cross-sectional research design in the contexts of recreational skiing and competitive rugby. However, longitudinal research is necessary if the TOP is to advance understanding of sport participation. The present paper aims to inform future research by exploring the performance of the developed staging algorithm in longitudinal research guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What stage transitions can be expected to occur within a sporting season?
- RQ2: Is the direction of stage transition (as characterized by increasing or decreasing psychological connection) reflected by fluctuations in resistance to change in the same direction?

## Literature review

The greatest threat to public health this century is physical inactivity (Blair, 2009), and participation in sport represents an important front in defending it (Bauman, Murphy & Lane, 2009). Governments invest billions of dollars into sport events/programs attempting to realize the health/social benefits of a more active society (Toohey, 2008; Jackson et al., 2005). Research indicates returns on these investments are either largely unknown for sport programs (Jackson et al., 2005), and negligible, or at best short lived minor increases, for events (Toohey, 2008). Within the TOP, an individual's psychological connection to sport occurs as a developmental progression across four stages labelled Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance. Beaton et al. (2009) developed a staging algorithm for the TOP using the Leisure Involvement construct (Kyle & Mowen, 2005) and validated this process with the Resistance to Change construct (Pritchard, Havitz & Howard, 1999). To investigate the research questions guiding this paper, this process will be replicated using a repeated measures design.

## Research design and data analysis

The present study collected data at two points in time (T1 & T2) during the sporting season separated by approximately six months. Participants were registered members of Softball Australia. Data was collected on involvement facets, resistance to change, demographics and participation frequency. The analysis of T1 data followed the procedures of Beaton et al. (2009). ANOVAS tested differences on involvement scores by categorical variables for T1 results. This procedure was repeated with T2 data to answer RQ1. To answer RQ2, the stages were rank ordered from Awareness through Allegiance for both T1 and T2 (i.e. Awareness = 1 ... Allegiance = 4). The T1 rank order was subtracted from the T2 rank order to create a summary measure of stage transition. The resulting sign (+, 0, -) of the summary measure was used to categorize each respondent into groups of progressive transition for +, unchanged for 0, and regressive transition for -, to facilitate the use of paired-sample t-tests to answer RQ2.

## Results

A total of 523 participants registered for the study, 467 provided complete and usable surveys at T1. Baseline data from T1 demonstrated the following stage distribution: Awareness 41 (9%), Attraction 35 (7.5%), Attachment 158 (34%), and Allegiance 233 (49.5%). ANOVA revealed resistance to change significantly increased ( $p < 0.01$ ) across stages. Subsequent ANOVA's revealed no significant differences for any demographic measures or participation frequency. A final sample size of 292 completed both T1 and T2. ANOVA results from T1 were replicated in T2.

For RQ1, all stages experienced fluctuations in membership from T1 to T2. The summary measure for analyzing the data in respect to RQ2 revealed 118 participants transitioned among the stages. Paired-sample t-tests revealed that resistance to change measures fluctuated in the direction of stage transitions. The progressive transition group difference in means was 0.75,  $t = 3.473$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = 34$ , the unchanged group difference in means was -0.09,  $t = -1.801$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $d = 173$ , and the regressive transition group difference in means was -0.71,  $t = -4.918$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = 82$ .

## Discussion and conclusion

The affirmative answer to RQ2 speaks to the validity of the staging procedure. The results pertaining to RQ1 show that while the majority of participants (60%) did not demonstrate stage transitions between T1 and T2, a number of participants from each stage did transition in that time.

In summary, this research is the first longitudinal study of the TOP. The findings provide evidence that research investigating stage transition processes in multiple contexts is warranted. Understanding these processes has the potential to inform the practice of sport and the evaluation of programs. For example, an understanding of how one might assist progressive transition, and hinder regressive transitions, could be used to leverage the short-lived spikes in participation coinciding with mega sport events into lasting legacies.

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