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## **BALANCING PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE INTERESTS: AN EXPLORATION OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OUTCOMES FROM CHARITY SPORT EVENT PARTICIPATION**

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### **BACKGROUND**

Increasingly, sport events are conceptualised as vehicles to deliver benefits for participants (Chalip, 2006). Evidence suggests that involvement in participatory sport events (e.g., fun runs, bike rides, marathons) contributes to quality of life and wellbeing outcomes (Filo & Coghlan, in press). In turn, this places participatory sport events as important assets in national agendas to advance healthy and active lifestyles.

Charity sport events combine active physical participation with a broader fundraising objective. Individuals derive a number of benefits from charity sport event participation, including camaraderie with other participants and physical competence (Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2009). For this reason, an abundant literature explores the motives for, and benefits of, participation in charity sport events. Building on this perspective, Wood, Snelgrove, & Danylchuk (2010) revealed that participant identity played an important role in the behaviour of charity sport event consumers. Considering this point, there is an opportunity to explore how individuals balance personal desires and interests with training and fundraising commitments for charity sport events. In this study, we use self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985), to explore one central question: how do event participants balance personal and collective identities prior to and during participation in a charity sport event?

### **METHOD**

We used an exploratory, in-depth, cross-sectional qualitative design focussed on the 24-hour MEGAswim, an Australian fundraising event for the organisation, Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Although delivered nationally, the data we present comes from participants in the Melbourne MEGAswim. Using a

semi-structured interview schedule, we explored the central research question in interviews that ranged from 20-40 minutes in duration. We recruited participants through a gatekeeper, who emailed fellow MEGAswimmers a project information sheet, which included an invitation and ethical guidelines. We conducted 14 interviews via telephone with event participants, then ceased due to a theoretical sampling issue, which we discuss next.

## RESULTS

Coding of the interview data illustrated that participants belonged to two discrete populations based on personal exercise levels aside from the MEGAswim. In group one, participants continued to train as normal prior to, and following, the MEGAswim due to existing physical activity routines or club memberships. This group did not sacrifice anything for the collective objective of performing in the event (i.e., additional training), aside from the event itself. Instead, the event provided an outlet to participate in a physically challenging swim and raise money for a good cause. Due to the simplicity of preparing for the event, this group took part annually, which led to the implementation of tried and tested fundraising strategies to reach targets. In group two, participants without habitual exercise patterns did engage in abnormal training patterns in addition to existing physical activity routines. Importantly, this group explained abnormal physical activity patterns due to obligation (i.e., collective interests) as well as the charitable cause linked with the event. However, this group also described how event preparation drove this behavioural change, which subsided at the conclusion of the MEGAswim.

## CONCLUSION

Turner (1985) stipulated that people transition from unique self-driven behaviour to in-group favouring actions due to a process of self-categorisation. However, the extent that participants in this study transitioned towards new collective exercise habits (favouring event aims) related to pre-existing physical activity patterns. This preliminary dataset illustrated that event participation provides an outlet for habitual exercisers, but exerts little impact on their exercise patterns – beyond a 24-hour swimming event, once per year. For individuals who did not exercise regularly, the MEGAswim activated a behavioural change – sometimes reluctantly – due to a perceived obligation to the event organiser and the charitable cause: MS Australia. This group put their personal interests aside for the good of the event, which aligned closely with self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985).

These preliminary findings provide insights for future research into the influence of participation on charitable fundraising behaviours and broader health and wellbeing outcomes from sport events. Individuals who participate in sport and physical activity frequently do so out of personal motivation and existing commitments (which may include external group memberships). Therefore, the focus for sport event managers seeking to promote healthy and active lifestyles rests beyond habitual exercisers. Instead, it concerns the attraction of non-regular participants. Therefore, event managers need to design and implement programmes, or partnerships that allow non-regular participants to continue in the activity following the event. While the attraction of committed participants remains important, these initial data indicate that the effects of event participation for this group have minimal influence on health and wellbeing outcomes.

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