Youth Athletes’ Process of Acquiring the Sport Development Perspective at the Youth Olympic Games

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Through the power of sport, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) strives to develop social and sport outcomes for the young competitors of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG; Hanstad, Parent, & Houlihan, 2014; MacIntosh, Parent, & Culver, 2019). For instance, the IOC aims to “contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced in accordance with Olympism and its values” (IOC, 2017, p. 15). Moreover, the IOC has described the YOG as a place to learn about sport, culture, and education relating to the Olympic Values of Excellence, Friendship, and Respect for young athletes (IOC, 2014). Over the past three editions of the YOG, the IOC has developed the YOG concept and its sport, culture and education offerings to participants (Parent, MacIntosh, Culver & Naraine, 2019). It therefore becomes important to examine the IOC’s espoused outcomes given this evolution. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate these espoused outcomes from the perspective of the young athletes competing at the 2018 YOG. In particular, the causal process of how the planned service environment of the YOG contributes (if at all) to young athletes’ learning is examined using a transformative service research lens (Anderson, & Ostrom, 2015) and control value theory (Perkun, 2006).

A survey instrument was created based on previous research with athletes (MacIntosh, Kinoshita, Naraine, & Sato, 2019). The survey was sent post-Games via an online invitation and was constructed to measure the athletes’: 1) satisfaction with the service environment; 2) enjoyment of the YOG, 3) learning experience at the YOG, and; 4) athlete value perception. 330 anonymized survey responses were collected (boys = 130, girls = 200). SPSS was used to run the analyses. Four models were examined with two-mediators in each using the PROCESS macro Model 6 based on 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013).

According to the results, all the reliable and independent factors (i.e., Learn & Share, Service Experience, Basic Needs, and Communication) significantly predicted YOG athlete value perception through learning (Mediator1) and enjoyment (Mediator2) both individually and in-sequence.

For the IOC to create greater YOG athlete value (an IOC desired outcomes), athletes’ sense of enjoyment and learning are essential. This investigation clarified the importance of ensuring basic and communication needs are met for young athletes. Additionally, this study demonstrates the importance of the service environment, including the Learn and Share component, on athlete enjoyment and learning. Evidence demonstrates that, through athlete enjoyment and learning, the acquisition of YOG athlete value increases, consequently bolstering the notions advanced in control value theory where positive emotions enhance one’s learning. Thus, for the IOC, creating an environment that is not only focused on the competition, but that also offers education and cultural opportunities for athlete exchange is important. This study demonstrates how the YOG impact young athletes through their unique program and, in particular, the significant relationship between enjoyment and learning on the acquisition of a target variable in sport.