Understanding Demonstration Effect on Non-sport Behaviors: A Conceptual Application of the Transtheoretical Model

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Sport organizations and athletes have long been considered influential to sport fans. They encourage societal-appropriate behaviors, which have increased in 2020 due to COVID-19 health-related elements and social justice actions (Leng & Phua, 2020). The rise of social media, and immediate access to fans, has increased the number of communication messages which fans receive. These communications typically serve a purpose, and oftentimes are intended to encourage fans to take action, however, there is a lack of research examining the effects of these communications in the context of societal behaviors.

In order to examine this relationship, this conceptual presentation will focus on demonstration effect. Demonstration effect has been used to describe the process in which people are inspired by elite sport, sports people (e.g., athletes) and sport events (Weed et al., 2012), so it can be hypothesized that the way sport properties market to fans may inspire them to continue or change certain behaviors. A systematic review of twenty-one demonstration effect studies identified the processes, outcomes associated with sport participation. While the impact of demonstration effect is indeterminate, the review provided evidence that improvement in physical activity around sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, was evident (Weed et al., 2015).

While demonstration effect has been found to influence physical activity and sport participation behaviors, there is a need to explore this effect on non-sport related behaviors, often articulated through sport communication outlets. There is also limited literature around the theoretical foundations of demonstration effect (Potwarka, 2015). This presentation will address these two gaps, and examine conceptual applications using the transtheoretical model (TTM) (Porchaska & DiCelemnte, 1992) and the intersection with demonstration effect. It has been suggested that TTM may evoke an individual’s attitudinal changes toward sport behaviors (Weed et al., 2015), and posits that individuals travel through six stages of change linked to behavior; precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination.

This conceptual analysis will discuss non-sport related themes such as health-related behaviors (e.g., wearing a mask); environmental behaviors (e.g., recycling) and political behaviors (e.g., voting). In addition, this research will dissect demonstration effect applied to multiple sport communication senders (i.e., sport leagues, teams, and athletes) in the context of the TTM stages of change to understand the potential emotional and behavioral effect on sport fans. These behavioral clusters and communication senders are commonplace in today’s sport landscape, and could be indicative of the role in which sport plays to influence future fan societal behaviors.

This research is novel in that the outcome of demonstration effect in sports has been highly geared toward sport participation, so expansion of demonstration effect to understand the potential link to commonly-communicated societal behaviors is warranted. As sport properties (e.g., leagues, teams, talent) will likely continue the frequency of communication which promote societal behaviors, this research will also fill a gap in the knowledge of how and why campaigns by sport organizations influence fan behaviors, or fail to do so. Future research and implications will be discussed in more detail during the presentation.