

Opening the 'black box' of building mass sport and physical activity participation from major sporting events: developing a process model of event inspiration

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Opening the ‘black box’ of building mass sport and physical activity participation from major sporting events: Developing a process model of event inspiration

Abstract

Research question: The paper examines the growing research interest in event inspiration, specifically the assumption of building mass sport and physical activity (SPA) participation through major sporting events (MSEs). It aims to clarify the processes through which inspiration can be cultivated as a first step to form SPA intention and behaviour from MSEs.

Research methods: Insights from psychology, event management, health behaviour, and sport studies literature were integrated to develop a process model of event inspiration.

Results and findings: The study argues that “being inspired by” is different to “being inspired to”; and MSEs are one of several sufficient but not necessary causes for building SPA. Personal characteristics at the micro level and contextual conditions at the macro/meso levels also influence the potential for event inspiration. A psycho-behavioural process model is subsequently proposed, highlighting the dynamic interplay between event inspiration, event leveraging, and behaviour change, emphasising that leveraging efforts should align with the timing of inspiration—either pre-, during, or post-event—and account for the multi-stage behaviour change process (willingness, intention, and action), rather than adhering to traditional event hosting phases. This model suggests that these processes should work in tandem to achieve the intended inspirational effects of MSEs.

Implications: The paper offers a significant conceptual contribution to understanding the potential of MSEs to promote more active lifestyles within the general population. The new

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theoretical model marks a step change in our understanding of “inspiration” in the context of MSEs that contributes to future development in research and practice.

Introduction

The idea that major sporting events (MSEs) will in some way inspire people to become more active is often lofty rhetoric used by policymakers to garner public support for these events. For instance, the well-known tagline of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was to “Inspire a Generation” (LOCOG, 2007), while the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics sought to “inspire and motivate a population of 300 million in China to take part in winter sports” (Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games Bid Committee, 2015, p. 6). Similarly, the Paris 2024 Olympics aimed to “turn the inspiration of the Games into the participation of millions in sport and healthy, active living” (Paris Olympic Games 2024 Bid Committee, 2017, p. 14). A commonly referred concept in this context is “inspiration”.

From a broader perspective, using MSEs as a means to promote more active lifestyles among the general population is relevant to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3 – “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” – and specifically Target 3.4 relating to reducing “premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promoting mental health and well-being” (United Nations, 2024). If the evidence in favour of the inspirational effects of MSEs can be demonstrated legitimately at the population level, then they can be used as an intervention in pursuit of achieving the physical and mental health benefits associated with meeting the World Health Organisation’s (2022) recommended levels of physical activity for adults and adolescents. In doing so, MSEs can play a role in reducing the economic burden of physical inactivity. That said, it is important for researchers and policymakers not to

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overestimate the inspirational potential of MSEs, as evidence to support the end goal of growing sport and physical activity (SPA) participation has been mixed and inconclusive.

Numerous studies have attempted to measure the inspirational impact (Ramchandani & Coleman, 2012; Teare et al., 2021) or “demonstration effects” of MSEs (c.f. Bakhsh et al., 2023; Potwarka, Snelgrove, Wood, et al., 2020; Weed et al., 2015). Terminology such as “inspiration”, “demonstration” or “trickle-down effects” seems to be used interchangeably in the literature, often overlapping or equated. Furthermore, as a relatively new area of inquiry, initial investigative attention tends to focus on identifying the *results* – i.e., has there been any meaningful impact on sport participation as a result of MSEs, and what is the evidence? Consequently, the construct of inspiration, demonstration, or trickle-down effects, regardless of the term used, is often swiftly treated as a single entity - a typical “black box” issue; i.e., a situation where we know that something may be working or having an effect, but we do not understand completely how it works inside (Chen et al., 2013; Chen et al, 2024a).

As this body of literature evolves, we argue that more research is needed to disentangle this muddle of concepts and open the “black box”. The value of this differentiation is not confined to how these concepts are represented and investigated in academic research; it applies equally to policy and practice. Only when promoters, funders and organisers of MSEs are able to better understand these concepts and their sphere of influence over them, can they then be expected to: articulate with greater precision and authority their ambitions and goals for hosting MSEs (i.e. setting realistic targets for impact); establish the processes by which those goals will be achieved (i.e. designing and implementing leveraging strategies; c.f., Taks et al., 2018); and, put in place relevant systems to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of interest.

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This paper seeks to address this “black box” issue and enhance our understanding of the concept and theories of inspiration by identifying a potential process through which event inspiration can be cultivated in the context of MSEs, as presented in a process model. The key value of the process model lies in its novel emphasis on the dynamic interplay between event inspiration, event leveraging, and behaviour change, highlighting the importance of aligning leveraging efforts with the timing of inspiration and the multi-stage behaviour change process.

Inspiration in the context of MSEs: A review of existing evidence

There have been numerous efforts, both systematic reviews (e.g., Annear et al., 2019; Lion et al., 2022; McCartney et al., 2010; Weed et al., 2015;), and comprehensive reviews (e.g., Bauman et al., 2021; Potwarka & Wicker, 2021; Storm & Denstadli, 2024; Teare & Taks, 2021), synthesising the evidence on building SPA through MSEs. All of these reviews converge on a similar conclusion: the assumption that MSEs can boost mass participation effectively is contested, if not entirely unfounded. A few critical issues may explain this conclusion.

The first issue is the insufficient understanding of event inspiration itself. Inspiration is an established psychological construct (Hart, 1998; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) that has been applied in many disciplines, such as education (Sjaastad, 2012), and management (Chopra & Kanji, 2010). Despite being central underpinnings of concepts such as demonstration effects or trickle-down effects, its meaning, understanding, and interpretation in the field of event management remain relatively underexplored.

By “underexplored”, we do not mean that there are a limited number of studies examining event inspiration. Rather, we are referring to the tendency to take the term for

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1 granted without necessarily delving into what inspiration means in the context of sporting
2 events, especially given some confusion over whether “feeling inspired” can be equated with
3 “inspirational effects” (Chen et al., 2024b). Furthermore, our understanding of how
4 inspiration is triggered in an event context remains somewhat superficial. Weed et al.’s (2015)
5 broader definition of the demonstration effect – as “a process by which people are inspired by
6 elite sport, sports people, or sport events to actively participate themselves” (p. 197) –
7 outlines at least three sources of inspiration: (1) elite success at international events, (2) sport
8 stars as personalities, and (3) hosting elite sporting events. Empirically, while some studies
9 suggest that feelings of inspiration often arise from watching elite athletes and the emotional
10 excitement associated with MSEs (e.g., Wicker & Frick, 2016), others have yielded mixed
11 results when modelling the three courses to test their effects on SPA (e.g., Stom et al., 2018).

12 Regardless, the basic logic behind policy decisions regarding event hosting seems to
13 be that: public enthusiasm for SPA can be ignited; individuals can choose or participate in
14 various SPA post-event; and hosting MSEs can be seen as an intervention that provides a
15 platform for this to happen. However, these assumptions are clearly simplistic and deviate
16 from mainstream understanding of behaviour change in SPA through an intervention, as the
17 process from health behaviour intention to initiation and maintenance involves multiple
18 stages (c.f. the TTM model, Prochaska et al., 1992; the Exercise Adoption Model (EAM) by
19 Brooks et al., 1996; and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) by Funk & James,
20 2001), that are interrelated and intricately connected (Rhoder, 2021).

21 More recently, Weed et al. (2015) pioneered the application of stage-based models of
22 sport engagement in their systematic review of the evidence on sport participation impacts,
23 where they paid close attention to the process of behaviour change in the context of MSEs on
24 sport participation. Potwarka and Wicker (2021) summarised the “conditions” under which

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“trickle-down effects” occur. Nevertheless, the complexity of the process from inspirational feelings to behavioural change (i.e., inspirational effects) is often not fully illuminated or understood. In other words, a full understanding of event inspiration requires an examination of the entire process, which encompasses both the activation of inspirational feelings and the subsequent participation in SPA following the experience of feeling inspired by an event. Therefore, we use the term “event inspiration” to refer to either part or the whole of this process.

The complexity of the event inspiration process has been further intensified by other factors. Firstly, event inspiration is multidisciplinary. Event evoked (i.e., triggered) inspiration is often conceptualised as a psychological state, whereas the interventions for behaviour change are often analysed within the domain of health behaviour, and sport participation legacy/impact is examined by event management and sport policy researchers. This then results in a disciplinary disconnect (McDonagh, 2013): there is neither a sufficient understanding of cognitive processing and constraints on individual health behavioural changes, nor an adequate recognition of the unique characteristics of each event (Schulenkorf et al., 2024).

Moreover, methodologically, research on the demonstration/trickle-down effect (e.g. Bauman, Bellew, & Craig, 2015; Potwarka & Leatherdale, 2016) has relied heavily on the examination of secondary data generated from repeat cross-sectional designs. These designs have limitations in attributing changes in participation (before and after the event) or related outcomes directly to the event itself, overlooking the fact that the event is only one of the sufficient conditions, or part of the larger ‘conjunctive causation’ process (Beach & Pederson, 2016, p. II), for triggering mass participation changes in SPA.

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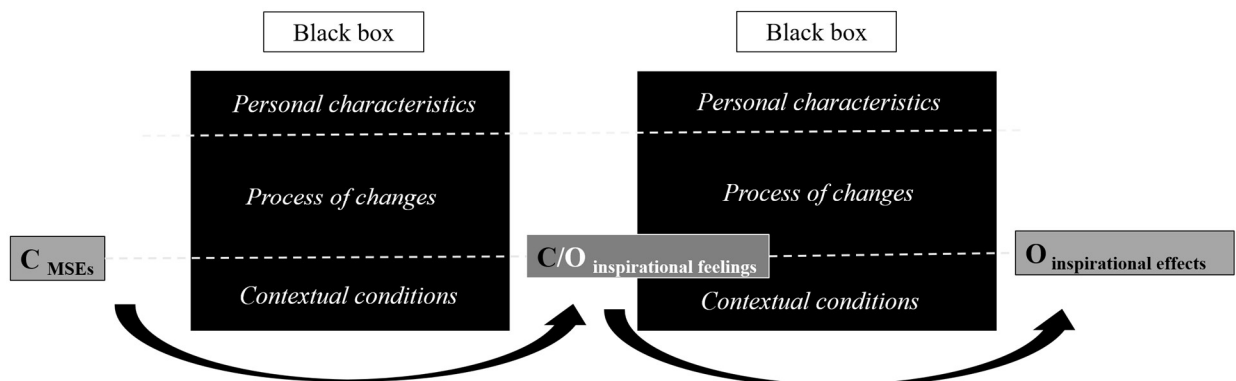
Contextually, when considering the nature of the events themselves, although an inspirational effect is not guaranteed to happen, in cases where there has been some positive evidence, the type of sport featured or the size of the event matters (Taks et al., 2014). For example, events that feature a specific sport can boost interest and participation in that particular sport, as evidenced in the case of Rugby World Cup (Frawley & Cush, 2011) and Football World Cup (Frawley & Van den Hoven, 2015), while others have a more general effect on SPA when hosting certain iconic events, such as the Olympics, showing temporary spikes (Pappous, 2011), or a cohort effect potentially arising from the shared experiences of MSEs during youth (Aizawa et al., 2018). The extent to which the sport featured at the events was popular in the host country is an important factor to consider as the local popularity of a sport featured at a given event may determine its potential of garnering media coverage for leveraging participation in that sport (Storm et al., 2018). This is not to say that, in some cases, hosting the Olympics (Bauman et al., 2015) or specific single sporting events (Hodgetts & Duncan, 2015) does *not* necessarily promote SPA. Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider the sport-specific and event-specific influence (Mahtani et al., 2013) when investigating inspirational effects or interpreting study results. This awareness allows for a more accurate understanding of how particular events may inspire participation.

Hence, it is necessary to clarify, among other conditions, the role MSEs play—whether they are *sufficient* (effective on their own) or *necessary* (required to guarantee the outcome)—in generating event inspiration, in order to open the aforementioned “black box” and gain a clearer understanding of causal processes (Chen & Henry, 2016, 2020). When claiming Y (a cause) is a *sufficient* cause by itself enough to produce O (an outcome), it means that Y does not have to be present for an outcome O to occur, but when Y is present, O will occur, contingent upon a set of contextual conditions being present (Bennett & Checkel,

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2014). Whereas claiming X (a cause) is a *necessary* cause for O to occur, it means without X, O will not occur. Here, we argue that an MSE (Y) is part of a set of sufficient but not necessary causes for generating “inspirational feelings” (an outcome). “Inspirational feelings” can also act as a “cause”, contingent upon the occurrence of necessary causes, and is likely to lead to “inspirational effects” (an outcome). But the mechanisms in these two processes are not yet explicitly theorised and therefore remain “black-boxed” (see Figure 1). In other words, for O (inspirational effects) to occur, having Y (MSEs) is not enough, because other factors (such as individual circumstances, personal characteristics, policy environment, existing resources, etc.) that collectively play a role in generating the causal impact (Ragin, 2000).

Figure 1. Causal mechanisms (C) for understanding event outcomes (O) of inspiration in the context of hosting MSEs.



In terms of other factors, for example, past research reveals that inspirational effects are more (or less) likely to occur amongst individuals who are from certain age populations (i.e., youth, Darko & Mackintosh, 2016), certain participation groups (i.e., those who are active already, Ramchandani et al., 2014), socio-cultural backgrounds (i.e., those from

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disadvantaged backgrounds, Liang et al., 2024), or possessing prior knowledge of and interest in sport (Teare et al., 2021). Thus, at the micro (individual) level, *personal characteristics* play a role in influencing inspirational effects. At the macro-/meso- level, *contextual conditions* such as the host country’s socio-cultural context, governmental policies, investment in sport (which lead to changes within the sports system and infrastructure), and the engagement of stakeholders may also influence event inspiration potential (Aizawa et al., 2018; de Cocq et al., 2021).

Another factor likely to be “blackened out” or ignored is the understanding of *the process of changes*. Many stage-based models of behavioural change, such as the EAM, highlighted the multi-stage nature of the change process that begins with earlier attitudinal stages—not aware (also described as uninterested or lacking belief in benefits), ready to consider, and committed to starting—and progresses to later behavioural stages, including trying, short-term commitment, and long-term commitment (Brooks et al., 1996). Similarly, the TTM model, which encompasses multi-stages of behaviour changes, outlines a multi-stage process when explaining how inspirational effects influence participation (Weed et al., 2015). In other words, actual behaviour change through event inspiration does not happen instantaneously. This is why “inspirational feelings” are an outcome of “MSEs” (in the first black box), where the main changes refer to going through the attitudinal stages of the behaviour change process. Moreover, “inspirational feelings” are also a plausible mechanism that leads to the generation of an “inspirational effect” (in the second black box).

In summary, the discussion above highlights that while MSEs are part of a set of sufficient but not necessary causes for generating inspirational effects, there is generally a lack of appreciation for the complexity of the inspiration process and an insufficient understanding of the concept itself. This lack of appreciation and understanding likely

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explains why the empirical evidence for confirming or rejecting the assumption that MSEs can effectively boost mass participation remains inconclusive.

The narrative presented below is structured into four sections: rethinking what we mean by “inspiration”; rethinking what produces inspiration; rethinking what is meant by leveraging for event inspiration; and, rethinking the processes by which event inspiration can be cultivated and translated into participation. This is all encapsulated within a process model of event inspiration.

Rethinking “inspiration” in the context of MSEs

As inspiration is central to any discussion of potential participation impacts of MSEs, it is essential to conceptualise an understanding of inspiration in the context of MSEs. This includes re-thinking what is meant by inspiration, identifying forces and leveraging strategies that produce and enable it, and examining the process through which event inspiration can be cultivated.

Rethinking what we mean by “inspiration”

Inspiration is a psychological phenomenon, so it is essential to return to the realm of psychology to gain a deeper understanding of what the term “inspiration” truly entails. In the field of psychology, early perspectives on inspiration, such as Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis (1993), emphasised its nonconscious origin, suggesting that inspiration is a naturalistic force, something that occurs spontaneously rather than being consciously willed. Subsequently, researchers discovered that external factors, including nature, music, literature, or exemplary individuals (role models), could activate inspiration, leading to creative endeavours, spiritual

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growth (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999), or the evocation of positive motivational states (Haidt, 2003). This evidence suggests that inspiration can indeed be triggered.

Regardless of its origin, there is a consensus that inspiration involves activation and carries a positive emotional aspect (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) were among the first psychologists who explored the psychological concept of inspiration both theoretically and empirically. In their conceptualisation, inspiration serves as a tripartite model where an individual perceives something that exceeds their own abilities, referred to as “transcendence”, due to an external influence, known as “evocation”. This experience compels the person to express or act upon their newfound understanding, referred to as “motivation”.

Inspiration implies an “awakening or accommodation to something new, better, or more important” (Thrash & Elliot, 2004, p. 958). Therefore, in the context of MSEs, it seems to reinforce the assumption that if inspiration is effective, individuals who are involved in these events can experience awakening towards either new sports or improved sport participation, as something more important, particularly considering the importance of physical activity for health benefits.

As demonstrated by Thrash and Elliot (2004), inspiration can be divided into two component processes: “being inspired by” and “being inspired to”. People can be inspired “by” something or someone –an evocative object-- leading to transcendence, and “to” take action or do something, which relates to approach motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). This differentiation is insightful as it clarifies that one can be inspired by something or someone without necessarily feeling inspired to *take action*. The source of inspiration is valued for its inherent worth, separate from its relevance to one's motivational goals. For instance, someone who watches a triathlon may be inspired by it (e.g., be awakened to the high performance of

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its athletes) but not necessarily be inspired to participate in triathlon, especially given its demanding physical requirements.

Two implications from Thrash and Elliot's study (2004) are particularly relevant for MSEs. First, individuals can experience inspiration by admiring someone who has achieved significant success, even when they do not believe they can reach the same level of success themselves. In other words, “being inspired by” alone constitutes “inspiration” and does not necessarily require the coexistence of “being inspired to”. This helps explain why some studies on MSEs report high levels of inspirational feelings that may not necessarily translate into actual behavioural changes.

When people enter an inspired state, they exhibit more than just enthusiasm or excitement; they demonstrate higher levels of spirituality and meaning, along with lower levels of controllability and self-responsibility for their inspiration (Kaufman, 2011). As Kaufman (2011) explained, inspiration can be seen as an unexpected interaction between one's *existing* knowledge and *external* information received. This interaction suggests that the information conveyed by an MSE (serving as external information) may inspire participation in SPA when it resonates with, reinforces, or expands one's understanding of sport in meaningful ways.

Second, inspiration involves an intrinsic appreciation of the source of inspiration itself, rather than its motivational significance (i.e., the ability to do something). In other words, one must genuinely appreciate what inspires them for what it is; inspiration transcends one's prior concerns or ability to match that particular standard. In simpler terms, one's existing ability to do something is relatively unimportant in facilitating inspiration; individuals with limited sport-related abilities can still be inspired by athlete role models to explore new sports or try something different. This notion explains why some studies

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observed notable positive SPA changes after event inspiration even among less active individuals (e.g., Xing, Chen & Chalip, 2024), while others (e.g., Carter & Lorenc, 2015) report that some feel less inspired due to the significant ability gap, leading to negative perceptions of their own athletic capabilities.

Thrash and Elliot (2003) acknowledged that inspiration can be a personality trait, with some individuals naturally more inclined to feel inspired than others. This reinforces the importance of “personal characteristics” in influencing the process of inspiration (Figure 1). However, it is essential to understand inspiration as primarily an emotional state. What sets it apart in the field of sport and event management is that inspiration is distinct from states of mere “enthusiasm” or “excitement”. It is worth noting that inspiration should *not* be conflated with excitement. Inspiration goes beyond mere excitement, serving as a catalyst for progress towards goals, with research by Milyavskaya et al. (2012) revealing that inspired individuals are more likely to set and successfully pursue inspired goals. The relationship between inspiration and goal progress is reciprocal, forming a cycle of greater goal inspiration and greater goal pursuit. This insight is crucial in explaining the past failures to achieve inspirational effects through MSEs, as measurement may confuse “excitement” with “inspiration” (Pappous, 2011). As pointed out by Thrash and Elliot (2003), while constructs such as positive affect, self-esteem, and optimism are closely related to the state of inspiration, they are psychometrically distinct.

To achieve inspirational effects, individuals, whether consuming or working at MSEs, need to possess not only excitement but also set goals for SPA participation. Therefore, when measuring the “inspirational effect”, referring to both feeling inspired and the subsequent participation behaviour attributable to inspirational feelings (Chen et al., 2024b), it is

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imperative to capture the emotional state of being inspired and the goal-setting intention and the consequent behaviour outcome.

In the next section, we explore ways to enhance the likelihood of experiencing inspiration. In summary, we argue that inspiration is an affective state that involves feelings being awoken, propelling individuals towards their desired behavioural goals (Carver, 2001).

Rethinking what produces inspiration

As inspiration is an emotional state of interest resulting from the interaction between one's existing knowledge and external information, it is crucial to establish what produces inspiration in the context of MSEs. Since an individual's existing knowledge varies and cannot be controlled, the potential influence lies in understanding what external information can be leveraged. In other words, what are the sources that can ignite an inspirational spark? The following discussion identifies (but is not limited to) a few sources that have been studied through empirical research.

Perhaps one of the primary triggers for inspiration is exposure to inspiring role models. One of the earliest instances of “inspirational effects” emerged from Australia's government policy statement regarding elite sport investment, suggesting that the performance of elite athletes, serving as role models, could enhance mass participation (Hogan & Norton, 2000). Since then, this inspirational trigger has been examined by various studies in the context of MSEs (Lion et al., 2022). The theoretical assumption is that observing the performances of elite athletes and witnessing desirable outcomes, such as enjoyment, recognition, and medals, during sporting events can influence an individual's intention to try a particular sport (Boardley, 2013). The elite athletes and/or their high-level sport performance serve as tangible examples for individuals to emulate, creating a pathway

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1 from admiration to active participation. Therefore, elite athletes or sports heroes, consistent
2 with the heroic effects often discussed in psychology (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999), are
3 recognised for their ability to trigger inspirational emotions. In this case, MSEs set the stage
4 and shine a spotlight on world-leading athletes.

5 Another source of inspiration can be linked to the universal *philosophical value* of
6 sport (Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2012). This inspiration is projected through on-field
7 competition, and often is interpreted or elevated by event commentary, extending beyond the
8 performances of athletes. Unlike the concept of “sports fandom” (which refers to the
9 enthusiasm and support that individuals show for a particular sport, team, or athlete, (Dixon,
10 2016), this trigger resonates with the idea that “sport is a good cause,” where sports
11 competitions reflect values such as honesty, fair play, and integrity—qualities particularly
12 relevant to the concept of Olympism introduced by Coubertin. A recent paper by Chen et al.
13 (2024b) sheds light on a deeper understanding of this source of inspiration. They found that
14 residents interpret inspiration as “sporting ethos” (specifically referring to the Olympic spirit
15 and relating to stories that emerge from the competition fields, highlighting the sporting
16 quality of overcoming challenges and demonstrating perseverance), which is not necessarily
17 associated with a single sports hero. This appreciation of sport spirit is particularly noticeable
18 in mega-events such as the Olympics, as the IOC (2011) claimed that “Olympism is a
19 philosophy of life.... seeks to create...the educational value of good example and respect for
20 universal fundamental ethical principles” (p.10). Therefore, the energy and enthusiasm
21 surrounding the celebration of sport spirit are likely to be internalised and reflected upon,
22 leading to a personal commitment to participating in sport, driven by the “inspirational power
23 of sport” (LOCOG, 2007).

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Beyond the sources of athletes and the philosophical value of sport, various aspects related to the event emerging as a result of strategic event leverage planning constitute another source of inspiration. Research indicates that efforts to leverage the event, including planned or funded participation legacy programmes, initiatives, participation opportunities, and facilities resulting from event hosting, are likely to have discernible impacts on SPA participation (Carter & Lorenc, 2015; Chen & Henry, 2016; Taks et al., 2018). This source of inspiration can occur not only within the event arena but also outside of it, as well as before and after the event. Inspiration triggered by this source may occur because of “consciousness raising”. Prochaska et al., (1992) found that an intervention has the potential to increase knowledge and awareness of engaging in a specific behaviour, thereby strengthening the intention to participate in that behaviour, such as sport involvement. MSEs, along with their associated promotion, marketing, organisation, and broadcasting, offer a platform to disseminate health-related messages about the benefits of being physically active as well as the promotion of SPA participation (Chen & Henry, 2016). Therefore, effective leveraging strategies can build on the event to create additional inspirational information. It is worth noting that, the transmission of inspiration is not necessarily confined by spatial boundaries, owing to the global reach of modern media. Viewership in various contexts allows inspiration to be widely disseminated through multiple channels (such as live television broadcasts, social media coverage, and documentary films about the events, Potwarka et al., 2023).

Rethinking what is meant by leveraging for event inspiration

Many existing studies have theorised, empirically tested, or argued for the need for event leverage in the field of event management (c.f. a systematic review of event leverage, Schulenkorf et al., 2024). The principal understanding is that event benefits are not generated

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1 automatically (Smith, 2009) and “activities need to be undertaken around the event itself”
2 (Chalip, 2004, p.228). Capitalising on sporting events’ ability to create a liminal space, where
3 participants experience excitement and enthusiasm, can lead to the generation or
4 amplification of social value for the event (Chalip, 2006). Therefore, when socio-managerial
5 strategies, and more specifically targeted tactics are employed, event planners can leverage
6 *liminal* experiences and *communitas* to enhance event impacts (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007). But
7 to achieve this, strategic planning must occur in advance – an ex-ante, event-themed
8 approach to planning is required (Smith & Fox, 2007). Such strategic thinking and process-
9 oriented awareness are highly relevant to event inspiration.

10 Although an increasing number of studies have evaluated the potential of MSEs for
11 building SPA, including a specific theoretical framework proposed by Chalip and his
12 colleagues (2017), the work relevant to “event leverage” has often treated this event-impact
13 aspect as “sport participation” (Schulenkorf et al., 2024) – a sub-component of a broader
14 concept of “social impact of MSEs” that is of a short-term nature. In the domain of “event
15 legacy”, some scholars also studied “sport participation legacy” (Dickson, Darcy & Walker,
16 2022), where investigation lies in some forms of “looking back” effort via post-hoc
17 evaluations (Preuss, 2007). Here we have two cross-sectional research approaches, which, by
18 design, break the entire process of “using event leveraging to build SPA participation” into
19 two specific time points for data collection and analysis – immediately after MSEs or long
20 after the event has finished. These approaches fail to recognise that event inspiration can
21 occur at various time points, spanning the pre-, during, and post-event phases.

22 Similar to Preuss’ (2015) argument that legacy is not confined to the post-event
23 period but can also emerge before and during the event, we argue that inspiration can
24 likewise occur prior to the event. Structural changes (Preuss, 2015) can begin well in

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advance, and event promotion efforts can generate inspiration even before the event commences. This is also known as the pregnancy effect (Weed, 2008), which describes the significant potential presented by the pre-event phase to leverage SPA participation (Weed, 2009; Weed et al., 2015).

Moreover, studies differentiating between the three types of participation outcomes— (1) increasing participation numbers from those who are completely inactive or lapsed, (2) increasing participation frequency, particularly among those with sporadic participation, and (3) switching participation between activities (Weed et al., 2015) – are even more limited. These differentiations are essential, as only the first two may result in additional participation, while activity switching is “unlikely to be the target of policy” (p. 216). There is also a notable lack of research exploring whether MSEs can contribute to maintaining or protecting SPA participation.

It is precisely these limited theoretical understandings of event inspiration that has restricted the effective application of event leverage for maximising SPA participation outcomes. Further, as we know from the work of Taks et al. (2018), when the specific event-impact aspect involves a more complex and longer-term health behaviour change, there are multiple barriers to undertaking the necessary steps to capitalise on an event for building SPA, even when a well-developed framework is in place.

Rethinking the process through which event inspiration is cultivated

Based on the discussion thus far, we attempt to depict a process model of event inspiration in Figure 2. This process model aims to provide a coherent framework for understanding the process by which event inspiration might occur; the various stages of the event life cycle during which it can happen; and where event leverage can be used to maximise event

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inspiration. The category boxes outlined in the model have a broadly similar level of specificity to ensure coherence. They illustrate the state of the change process—depending on an individual’s preconditions, event-related experiences, inspiration, decision-making, intentions, and actions—and conceptualise the causal associations between these components throughout the lifecycle of a MSE. Recognising the complexity of various levels and stages of behaviour change, this simplified process model retains only the key components without delving into detailed explanations of each element. Additionally, the following narratives are used to discuss nuances and key reference points that supplement Figure 2.

The hashed lines represent facilitators or enablers of movement along the process. There are two timelines (each depicted at the top and bottom of Figure 2) that aim to distinguish between the event inspiration timeline and the event leverage timeline (Dickson et al., 2022). In the central part of the model, we aim to highlight the progression through different stages.

The first stage (i.e., SPA willingness) recognises inspiration as a psychological state, ignited by an event (forming a type of consumption experience), as highlighted in the event inspiration timeline — “*being inspired by (inspirational feelings)*”. A momentary surge of inspiration can be elicited from the aforementioned sources, such as witnessing elite athletes perform during MSEs. Even if it is impractical to emulate these athletes, an appreciation for the inspiration they provide is likely to occur. The likelihood of successful inspiration evocation, however, is subject to some “*preconditions*” (see Figure 2). Consistent with Teare et al. (2021), preconditions refer to the extent of sport engagement prior to the event experience and can be characterised by the following four components: knowledge of sport; interest in the sport; the degree of fan identification with sport; and awareness of opportunities to participate in sport.

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The second stage (i.e., SPA intention) refers to the phase where individuals who have successfully experienced feelings of inspiration through events develop a clear intention to change their sport participation (“being inspired to”). As we learned from the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), intentions are extremely influential in determining motivated behaviour; and factors such as attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control have a direct influence on a person’s decision to perform the behaviour in question, particularly in the context of MSEs (Bakhsh et al., 2023; Potwarka, 2015).

The third stage (i.e., SPA action) involves a transition from an intention to a real action. The first two stages are only part of the inspiration process and are not sufficient on their own to account for the inspirational effects. For inspiration to be considered as “event inspiration” in the context of MSEs, it must transcend these initial phases to lead to behaviour change (a further extension of “being inspired to”). Only when the intention is translated into action is the event inspiration process truly complete.

Here, it is worth noting that event inspiration differentiates between “*willingness*”, “*intention*”, and “*action*”—portrayed as leverage objectives across stages in Figure 2. “Willingness” to engage in SPA is often formed during the first stage of the process model, while “intention” to engage in SPA occurs at the second stage through the decision-making process. Moreover, unlike “willingness”, “intention” is usually accompanied by a clear action goal and specific implementation steps, such as when, where, with whom, and what type of SPA to undertake (Ajzen, 1991). “Willingness” is directional but relatively vague, and it may or may not lead to implementation; whereas “intention” is a direct antecedent variable for predicting “action”. Having an “intention” to engage in SPA does significantly influence SPA participation (Rhodes et al., 2017), but it is not always predictive of actual behaviour

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(Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Due caution should be exercised when interpreting the effectiveness of “high inspirational intention” as nearly half of those who intend to engage in physical activity fail to follow through (Rhodes & de Bruijn, 2013). This gap is even larger for those who were previously non-participants, but were inspired to develop an intention to participate in SPA in the context of MSEs (Xing et al., 2024).

Thus, following through the event inspiration timeline, the process model outlines three specific stages of the psycho-behavioural change process. The existence of the second stage is contingent upon the successful emergence of the first stage; and the generation of inspirational effects (i.e., the third stage) relies on decision-making to transition from intention (i.e., second stage) to action. Thus, the emergence of the first stage does not necessarily trigger the onset of the third stage. For example, people may experience inspirational feelings because of sporting events, but this emotional experience may remain at the psychological level (being in the “inspiration state”) and may not lead to intent or actual actions (Figure 1). To achieve effective behaviour change, complementary forces are also necessary.

The connection between the three stages is reflected in the idea that the process of inspirational feelings is a necessary prerequisite for generating inspirational effects (i.e., having a positive impact on increasing participation). With further encouragement (e.g., exposure to leveraging initiatives), inspirational feelings can be engaged with (marketed to) before the event, amplified during the event, and transformed into a concrete intention for post-event SPA participation.

Before moving on to the discussion of the second timeline (i.e., the event leverage timeline), we argue that accentuating the close alignment between event leverage theory as outlined by Chalip et al. (2017) and the classic behaviour change model — the COM-B

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(Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour) system (Michie, et al., 2011)— might be helpful, theoretically, to inform the design of leveraging efforts (particularly regarding priorities across stages of event inspiration for behaviour change): *Motivation* for SPA participation can be triggered by event leverage aimed to amplify various inspirational sources; *Capability*, which refers to an individual’s psychological and physical capacity to engage in SPA, can potentially be trained or improved; *Opportunities*, which represent physical and social conditions external to the individual that support or encourage SPA participation, can also be enhanced through strategic event leverage initiatives.

In addition, the three stages of event inspiration—from willingness to intention and action — also serve as distinct leverage objectives that require different strategic designs and resource allocations, informed by behavioural change models such as the COM-B (Michie et al., 2011). This might include, for instance, during the willingness stage, leveraging activities can be designed to serve an educational function — providing information to promote healthy lifestyles (Michie et al., 2011). During the intention stage, leveraging efforts could be targeted to help individuals enhance their psychological and physical knowledge and skills related to physical activity and fitness (Michie et al., 2011), support individuals in developing their competencies, and strengthen the expected instrumental and emotional benefits of SPA engagement (Rhodes, 2021). Such efforts might enhance the function of inspiration triggers, effectively eliciting state inspiration and motivating to participate in sport. At the action stage, leveraging activities such as offering one-off vouchers or other incentives to try a new sport (e.g., Potwarka, Snelgrove, Drewery, et al., 2020), as well as enhancing the capacity of the SPA system to offer more opportunities for SPA participation (e.g., Lovett et al., 2020), are potentially helpful to support participation behaviour change.

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As emphasised above, event inspiration can occur at various time points, spanning the pre, during, and post-event phases. The key here is that when inspirational feelings occurs, leveraging efforts for behaviour change should take place simultaneously to maximise opportunities for successful behavioural transition. Event leverage strategies should also be tailored to the target group. In other words, if a target group has already been successfully inspired for SPA (e.g., through event promotion or a documentary featuring home national elite athletes) prior to the event, subsequent leverage efforts should prioritise supporting the behavioural changes already initiated by these inspirational sources, rather than adhering to the traditional phases of event hosting.

Finally, the point about instrumental attitudes towards SPA (i.e., expectations of functional benefits) and affective judgments (i.e., expectations of the enjoyment of physical activity) and their effects on “*intention*” and “*action*” (Figure 2) is worth highlighting. Not only is the role of both emotional and rational thinking in the decision-making process often overlooked (Denton & Krebs, 2017), but it is also important to acknowledge the ongoing influence of affective judgment, which extends beyond intention formation to actual SPA participation (Rhodes, 2021). Indeed, in the field of event studies specifically, it appears that the emotional experiences (i.e., state inspiration) elicited by events, alongside SPA attitude (i.e., values placed on the positive outcomes of becoming more active), subjective/descriptive norms (i.e., whether others will approve/disapprove of someone becoming more active) and perceived behavioural control (i.e., perceived barriers/facilitators to participation), collectively predict the intention of event spectators to participate in SPA (Ajzen, 1991; Bakhsh et al., 2023). Therefore, a multi-faceted leveraging approach is required to influence both instrumental attitudes and affective judgments (Rhodes, 2021) for each event inspiration

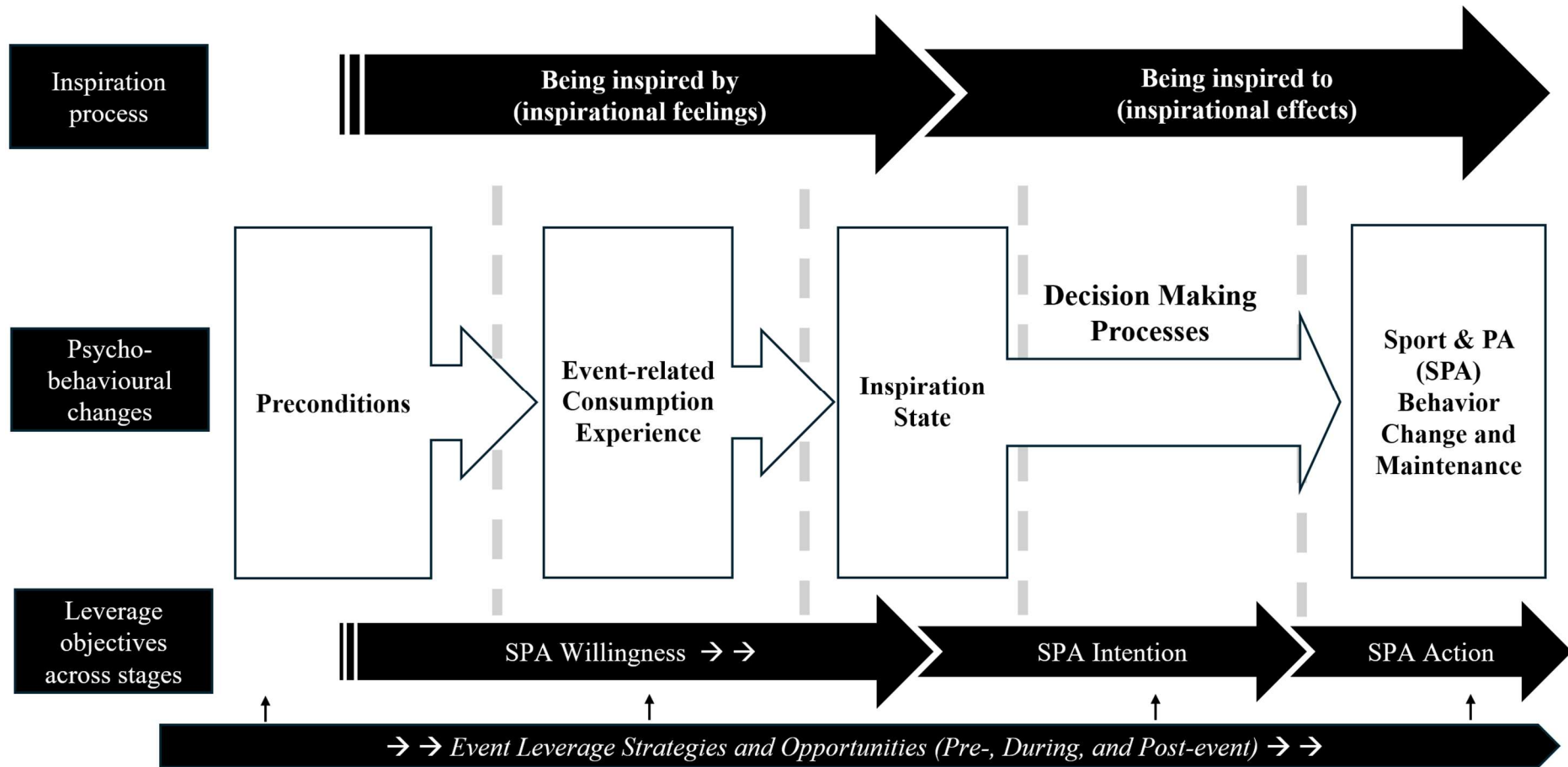
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1 occurrence, thereby facilitating the transition from inspirational feelings to intention and

2 action.

3

1 **Figure 2. A process model of event inspiration from MSEs.**



2

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1 Conclusion and future research perspectives

2 We advance the position that inspiration can be activated and harnessed for positive
3 SPA through MSEs. Our paper has attempted to open the “black box” to identify meaning and
4 sources for producing event inspiration; and the process through which inspiration can
5 translate into behaviour change. The distinction between “being inspired by” and “being
6 inspired to,” along with the three stages (i.e., willingness, intention, and action) of
7 psychological/behavioural changes in SPA participation is significant for understanding and
8 developing practical strategies for leveraging inspiration evoked from the consumption of
9 MSEs.

10 The key message is that inspiration has the potential to influence SPA behaviour
11 change, contingent on the integration of event leveraging strategies. This recognition is
12 important both theoretically and in terms of practical implications, as it underscores the need
13 for greater support from event organisers and policymakers. This is especially pertinent given
14 evidence highlighting the challenges of achieving inspirational effects, even with the
15 application of leverage (e.g., Storm & Denstadli, 2024). We suggest that event organisers and
16 host governments plan ahead for the possibility of integrating and embedding strategies to
17 capitalise on event inspiration and event leverage agendas into existing mass participation
18 and public health policy frameworks.

19 The proposed new process model contributes to the field in at least two key aspects:
20 Firstly, it introduces a novel psycho-behaviour-based framework for understanding the
21 process of event inspiration. The model highlights that contexts, individual circumstances,
22 and personal characteristics serve as *preconditions* that can amplify or diminish *event*
23 *experiences*, leading to varying levels of inspiration. Inspiration is then likely to trigger
24 behavioural changes after the *decision-making process*. For practice, understanding these

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1 nuanced differences is important to avoid touting unrealistic goals when bidding to host
2 MSEs. Secondly, it offers guidance for future research. Specifically, we call for researchers to
3 explore a range of research questions through the application of this process model. For
4 example, examining which personal characteristics or determinants are more prone to
5 influence each of the three stages; investigating whether these characteristics or determinants
6 remain consistent or vary across different stages; and exploring how best to measure these
7 factors. Researchers can explore this series of questions by conducting studies focused on
8 individual stages—a vertical slicing approach to our proposed process model. A vertical
9 slicing approach allows for an in-depth investigation into how leverage strategies influence
10 the corresponding stages. The choice of focus might depend on researchers' expertise and
11 interests, as we are not suggesting that one stage is inherently more important than another.
12 We argue that both aspects—the process of experiencing feelings of inspiration and the
13 process that generates inspirational effects leading to subsequent behaviour—are equally
14 important and worthy of research endeavour. Regardless of which specific stages researchers
15 choose to focus on, it is crucial to consider the conclusions drawn. For instance, if examining
16 the willingness stage in isolation, it may be inappropriate to claim a direct impact on sports
17 participation solely from “feeling inspired by the event”. Additionally, we encourage
18 researchers to consider a horizontal slicing approach in study design when adopting our
19 proposed model. This could help determine whether the strength of “inspirational feelings”
20 influences ultimate behavioural change. Such insights can only be gained by tracking
21 participants across all stages through longitudinal studies. It also allows for the examination
22 of the ongoing effects of leveraging strategies across the stages of event inspiration.

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