I am bolder: a social cognitive examination of road race participant behavior

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I Am Bolder: 
A Social Cognitive Examination of Road Race Participant Behavior

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Abstract

Sport participants have an economic value up to four times higher than that of sport spectators in the United States according to Kim, Smith, and James (2010). One participatory sport that has experienced tremendous growth in participation numbers worldwide since the mid-1990s is road racing. Road race event organizers currently face increased competition with each other to attract participants. Therefore the purpose of the study was to better understand the core determinants (or factors) believed to influence the behavior of road race participation. Advancing our understanding will assist sport managers in differentiating their events from competitors and increasing participation numbers in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Using Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the authors qualitatively examined participant narratives about their participation in the BolderBOULDER 10K, an annual road race hosted in Boulder, Colorado. Four major themes emerged from the narratives: family, health, the event experience, and empowerment. While some themes were consistent with previous findings, family and the event experience differed from previous sport marketing findings. Furthermore, these findings suggested that a participatory sporting event organizer’s ability to understand what drives participants’ behavior to run the race year after year may be key for event differentiation. Additional analysis relating to the SCT is presented, and implications and future research ideas are provided.

Keywords: running, road race, sport participation, Social Cognitive Theory

Introduction

Sport participants have an economic value up to four times higher than that of sport spectators in the United States (Kim, Smith, & James, 2010). One participatory sport that has experienced tremendous growth in participation numbers since the mid-1990s is road racing. Running USA (2013b) defined this trend as “the Second Running Boom” (para. 1). With the exception of the year 2003, the number of runners finishing a race in the US has increased every year since 1994 (Running USA, 2013b).

Research focused on the sport of running highlighted the uniqueness of the running industry during the global recession beginning in 2007, as participation numbers, apparel sales, and the number of road races all increased during a time when most industries experienced stagnation or shrinking profits (Eaglem an & Krohn, 2012). According to a report from Running USA, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting and building the sport of running, 2012 was a year of record growth for the running industry. From 2011 to 2012 the total number of runners in the US increased by nearly 3%, the number of finishers in US running events increased by 11.2%, and running shoe
sales increased by 23% (Running USA, 2013a, 2013b). The National Sporting Goods Association reported a 23% increase since 2009 in running apparel purchases that totaled $1.1 billion in 2010. This increase was higher than any other sport category listed in the report on athletic/sport clothing (National Sporting Goods Association, 2011).

In addition to increased sales, both US and international road races have enjoyed large participation numbers, indicating the running industry is strong worldwide. With more than 15 million road race participants and more than 26,000 road races taking place in the US in 2012 (Running USA, 2013b), along with the multitude of large road race events outside of the US each year, it is evident that road races compete with each other to attract participants. The increasing number of events available for participants to choose from, combined with the evidence that sport participants are quite attractive to event organizers from an economic perspective, highlight the importance for sport managers to understand what factors influence the behavior of running a road race among participants, as well as what factors affect their decision to repeat the event each year. This knowledge can serve as a key factor for sport managers and marketers in differentiating their road race from competitors and growing and sustaining their event’s participation numbers in an ever-expanding marketplace.

Studying the factors that influence behavior in some of the most popular road races in the US can expand this knowledge. One race that has experienced great success in its 35-year existence and continues to grow each year is the BOLDERBOULDER 10K, which takes place in Boulder, Colorado, every May on Memorial Day. Since the first race was held in 1979, it has grown from 2,700 participants to more than 52,000, 12% of whom travel from outside of Colorado to take part in the event (BOLDERBOULDER Media Guide, 2013). It is the third largest road race in the US and the seventh largest in the world (BOLDERBOULDER Facebook, n.d.). According to the BOLDERBOULDER Media Guide (2013), more than 100,000 spectators line the race course at the University of Colorado’s football stadium, Folsom Field, where the race finishes, to support the participants on race day. Additionally, professional athletes from around the world compete in the event for one of the largest non-marathon prize purses in road racing (BOLDERBOULDER Facebook, n.d.).

Utilizing the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the authors sought to examine text and video entries to the “I Am Bolder” contest hosted by BOLDERBOULDER organizers on Facebook. This analysis provides a better understanding of the factors within the participant and within the participant’s environment that influence the behavior of running the race. Previous researchers have identified some motivations for road race participation; however, no study has sought to understand the behavior of road racing by applying a behavior theory to the analysis. Several core determinants of the SCT are tied to motivation (i.e., knowledge, self-efficacy, goals, and outcome expectations); however, motivation does not always equal behavior. A person motivated to participate in a road race may encounter barriers or facilitators in his or her structural or social environment that influence race participation. The findings will assist sport event marketers in their efforts to craft communication that directly resonates with past and prospective participants as they consider race options each season. In particular, understanding the factors that influence road race participation will improve the understanding of those who choose to repeat the event experience each year, which will lead to better strategies to promote these events in ways that elicit allegiance from participants.

Road Race Participation Motives
According to Iso-Ahola (1999), motivation consists of the forces that initiate, guide, and sustain human behavior, and they can result from both internal and external stimuli (Carroll & Alexandris, 1997). Much research has been devoted to the study of sport participation motives, or the reasons that people participate in sport, and Shank (1999) stated that examining and understanding the motives of sport participants was important for sport marketers seeking to satisfy their customers.

Previous researchers have examined the motivations of road race participants, and have largely utilized surveys and questionnaires (Eaglem an & Hack, 2011; Funk, Jordan, Ridinger, & Kaplanidou, 2011; Havenar & Lochbaum, 2007). We understand from the results there are many different motivations for runners. For example, Eaglem an and Hack (2011) surveyed participants in a road race series consisting of 5K to 10K races and found physical fitness and self-esteem were the highest-rated motives. Filo, Funk, and O’Brien (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) examined sport participation motives of endurance athletes in multiple studies, and reported participants were motivated by physical and intellectual challenge, socializing with other runners, competency, camaraderie, cause, and escaping from everyday routine.

Masters, Ogles, and Jolton (1993) examined motivations of marathon runners and developed the Motivations of Marathoners Scale (MOMS). They focused on nine motivations for marathon runners: competition, personal goal achievement, psychological coping, self-esteem, life meaning, health orientation,
weight concern, recognition, and affiliation. Ogles and Masters (2003) used the MOMS to study motives to run a marathon, and classified the participants in five groups based on their distinct and varied motives. They encouraged future research on sport participants “in specific events” (p. 83), as this could reveal knowledge to assist sport managers as they work to increase participation in their events.

While some scholars have examined motives primarily relating to participating in the sport of running, others have examined the role of motives for participating in specific events. For example, Funk et al. (2011) sought to examine a specific mass participant sport event (MPSE). They surveyed participants in a Philadelphia-based road race event consisting of an 8K, half marathon, and full marathon, and found that the event included two tiers of motivation. The first tier related to motives involving challenge, enjoyment, strength and endurance, and positive health. The second tier included motives relating to competition, weight management, ill-health avoidance, social affiliation, physical appearance, and stress management. Funk et al. (2011) indicated that participants’ satisfaction with the management of the event itself played a role in future exercise intentions.

Similarly, from an event-specific perspective Eagleman (2013) examined the motives of runners who did and did not participate in women-only races. Eagleman found that for those who reported participating in these events, the opportunities to socialize with other women without feeling self-conscious were a strong motivator for participation. Relating to the findings of Filo et al. (2009) and Lock and Filo (2012), Eagleman (2013) also highlighted the importance of the role of values in participants’ motives. Those runners who did not participate in women-only races reported that they found such events to be discriminatory towards men and demeaning to women, which were incongruent with their personal values. Therefore, they chose not to participate in these races.

Lastly, Beaton et al. (2011) examined the motivations of marathon runners and found that those with stronger psychological connections to the sport of running were more likely to exhibit allegiance to the event in which they participated. These runners were found to score highest on the involvement facets of hedonic value, centrality, and symbolic value. While Beaton et al. (2011) employed a quantitative method they encouraged future researchers to utilize qualitative methodologies in examinations of runners or sport participants to provide richer and more comprehensive information on their motives and behaviors.

The research presented in this section provides an overview of the scholarly work that has been conducted to date on the motives of road race participants relating to the sport of running and specific road race events. However, being motivated does not always result in the behavior. Motivated people may encounter barriers in their structural or social environment that keep them from engaging in a behavior that they are motivated to do. The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) developed by Bandura may be used to understand how people acquire and maintain behavior, and has been used extensively as a framework to understand human behavior. Using SCT, factors within the person that influence motivation as well as barriers or facilitators in the structural and social environment that discourage or promote behavior can be examined. The SCT framework was applied in the current study to the behavior of road race participation. The SCT has been used to understand physical activity behavior (Brown, Hume, Pearson, & Salmon, 2013; Martin & McCaughtry, 2008); however, it has not often been applied to sport participation behavior outside of youth sport participation. The authors of this study sought to contribute to this limited line of inquiry utilizing the SCT in a qualitative investigation of sport participants’ behavior in the BolderBOULDER 10K race.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was introduced by Bandura in 1977 as an extension of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). It is a behavior theory and one of the most utilized theoretical frameworks for understanding behaviors. It has been used to identify facilitators in the built environment (e.g., sidewalks, street lights, etc.) that increase physical activity in children, to understand the importance of self-efficacy for physical activity behavior in African-American children, to examine the constructs that lead to increased physical activity behaviors in middle-aged adults, and to predict physical activity behaviors in employed women with and without children (Ayotte, Margrett, & Hicks-Patrick, 2010; Evenson, Scott, Cohen, & Voorhees, 2007; Tavares, Plotnikoff, & Loucaides, 2009).

According to Bandura (2004), there are five core determinants of SCT that influence a person’s behavior: 1) knowledge, 2) self-efficacy, 3) outcome expectations, 4) goals, and 5) social and/or structural facilitators (supports) and/or barriers in a person’s environment (Bandura, 2004). The first four core determinants reside within the person and are related to motivation. To be motivated to participate in a behavior, the person must have knowledge of the behavior, self-efficacy or the belief they can do the behavior, and their goals must be aligned with the outcomes they expect from the behavior. The fifth determinant of the SCT consists of items external to the
person, within their social or structural environment (Bandura, 2004). Barriers in the structural or social environment may keep a motivated person from engaging in a behavior.

To engage in a healthy behavior such as training for and participating in a 10K road race like BolderBOULDER, a person needs to have knowledge about the benefits of the behavior. The benefits of training for a road race may include improved cardiovascular fitness and stamina, improved mental health and stress reduction, and weight loss (O’Donovan et al., 2010; Tremblay et al., 2011; Vuori, 2010). Without knowledge of these health benefits, a person would be less likely to be motivated to participate in training for a road race. The most powerful predictor of physical activity behavior is self-efficacy or a person’s belief that he or she can successfully perform the behavior, such as training for and completing (run or walk) a 10K. A person is very unlikely to participate in a behavior that he or she has no or little belief that he or she will successfully accomplish. Additionally, when a person successfully engages in a behavior it tends to increase self-efficacy and the likelihood that he or she will repeat the behavior (Bandura, 2004).

A person’s adaptation to a physical activity behavior is also dependent on the outcomes that the person believes the new behavior will bring to his or her life and how the outcomes fit into the person’s goals (Bandura, 2004). Personal goals provide self-incentive to adopt a new behavior. Goals can be both short and long term. For people to be motivated to sustain physical activity, their goals need to be aligned with the outcomes that they expect to achieve from being physically active (Bandura, 2004). For example, weight loss might be an expected outcome associated with training for and participating in a road race with the personal goal of improved health or improved quality of life. Because the expected outcome and goal of running are in alignment, the behavior is supported.

Lastly, social and structural barriers and/or facilitators in a person’s environment influence physical activity behavior (Bandura, 1998; Bandura, 2004). A person is much more likely to sustain a physical activity endeavor—like training for and participating in a road race—if there is social support to do so. Likewise, a person is very unlikely to sustain physical activity if there are too many barriers, either social or structural. As Bandura (2004) states “personal change would be easy if there were no [barriers] to surmount” (p. 145).

By examining these core determinants, a researcher can begin to explain why people engage, or not, in certain behaviors. People are not likely to engage in a health behavior that they have no knowledge of, do not believe they can accomplish, and that is not supported by their goals or the environment (Bandura, 1998). If people have support to adopt a new behavior from family, friends, and/or the community, they are more likely to be successful. Additionally, facilitators in the structural environment influence a person’s behavior. For example, Evenson et al. (2007) found children are more likely to engage in physical activity if the structural environment supports physical activity; that is,
the environment has well-lit streets, walking and biking trails, low crime, etc. Looking at road race participation and training for a road race, a person is likely to train for and run a road race if their environment supports it through having inviting places to train, a culture that supports running, and availability of road races. Bandura (2004) emphasizes that health behaviors are not solely a personal matter and that some of the barriers or facilitators to healthy behaviors exist in the social and structural environment rather than in the individual.

Key to the SCT is the reciprocal or bidirectional relationship between a person, his or her environment, and behavior as “human behavior is a product of the dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral and environmental influences” (McAlister, Perry, & Parcel, 2008, p. 170). Factors within the person and the environment influence behavior as well as each other, and behavior influences factors within the person and the environment. For example, when a person engages in the behavior of running a road race and is successful, this increases the person’s self-efficacy, which in turn cause the person to repeat the behavior of running that road race, resulting in a sense of allegiance or loyalty to the race.

Some of the core components of the SCT have been indirectly identified by researchers studying motivations for road race participation. These include social support from other runners (environment), accomplishing a physical challenge (self-efficacy), and goal/outcome expectation of improved health (Eaglem an, 2013; Funk et al., 2011). However, participation in road racing has not been studied through the lens of a behavior theory. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to use SCT to better understand the core determinants and factors that influence the behavior of road race participation.

By evaluating BolderBoulder runner narratives, we can add depth to the understanding of road race participants. By understanding self-described behaviors of these road race participants, race organizers will be better able to craft marketing strategies to differentiate their event in this increasingly competitive environment.

Methods

A quantitative research design is appropriate when questions about “how many” or “how often” are asked, while a qualitative research design is preferred when questions are posed about “what,” “how,” or “why” a phenomenon exists (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Because the researchers wanted to understand how runners describe their BolderBoulder race experience, a qualitative research design was utilized. The present study was unique in its qualitative examination of participants’ own stories and narratives about taking part in a specific race. Examining the narratives through the lens of SCT, we can see how factors within the person and factors within the person’s environment influence his or her behavior of participating in a road race. Furthermore, the race examined was one deemed successful within the road race management community, evidenced by Runner’s World honoring it with the title of “Best 10K” race (Flax, 2009).

To celebrate the race’s 35th year in 2013, race organizers hosted an online competition titled “I Am Bolder” in which participants were asked to upload a video or written story and photo to the BolderBOULDER Facebook page about their experiences with the race. The Facebook page included the statement, “During the month of April we want to hear your BolderBOULDER story. Go to the I AM BOLDER app on our Facebook Page and share your story. One lucky winner will have his/her story shown on the big screen at Folsom Field at this year’s BolderBOULDER” (BolderBOULDER Facebook, 2013). In total, 45 race participants uploaded either a video or written story. Of these, five were videos and 40 were written stories. Men comprised 16 of the stories and women accounted for the remaining 29. In terms of residence, 28 of the participants lived in Colorado, 16 lived in other states within the US, and one was from Holland. Aside from these details, other demographic information such as age, education, or occupation was not available.

The focus of qualitative research, according to Altheide (1996), is to provide clear descriptions and meanings of the subject matter. The submitted videos and stories provided a rich sample of descriptions that could be analyzed in order to better understand participant behaviors. The authors utilized a qualitative document analysis (QDA) technique (Altheide, Coyle, DeVries, & Schneider, 2008). Altheide (1996) defined document analysis as “an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning” (p. 2). It is systematic, and according to Bowen (2009), QDA is used to “elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge” (p. 27). The documents analyzed should be prerecorded (text or image) and without intervention from the researcher. Bowen (2009) also noted that document analysis has often been used alongside other research methods, but in some cases, such as when an event has already taken place, it “may be the most effective means of gathering data” (p. 31) as a solo method. Because BolderBOULDER participants prerecorded (video and text) their stories without researcher intervention, and
the event took place in the past, QDA was determined to be an appropriate standalone method for data analysis.

Altheide (1996) wrote, “the meaning and significance of all documents is informed by the research perspective and act” (p. 2). Similarly, Creswell (2003) explained that the researcher in qualitative analysis “systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study” (p. 182), noting that this reflexivity, or acknowledgement of potential biases or values that shape the way in which the researcher analyzes the data, characterizes qualitative research. The three researchers from this study acknowledge their potential biases, as two have participated in the BolderBOULDER 10K race in the past, and one has done previous research on road race participation. Due to these potential biases, the researchers took necessary steps to increase the trustworthiness of the research. These efforts are described later within this section.

The three steps of QDA include “skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). The three researchers utilized these steps to independently watch and read the user-submitted videos and stories from the 2013 BolderBOULDER “I Am Bolder” contest. Each researcher took detailed notes while watching and reading the submissions, and in most cases the video or story was watched or read multiple times to allow the researchers to take the most accurate notes possible. Keywords, phrases, and direct quotes from each video and story were noted in order to determine the overall themes from the submissions. Throughout the coding process, the three coders used Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparison method. This involved the coded data being constantly compared to the previously coded data to assist in better identifying emerging themes. At times it required the researchers to return to previously coded cases in order to watch or read the stories again and add additional details to the notes.

According to Gratton and Jones (2004), the sample size should not be predetermined in qualitative research, and instead a saturation point should be reached. This is the point when no additional data provides new information. Although the researchers agreed that the saturation point was reached before all 45 entries were coded, each researcher coded the full data set to ensure data analysis was as thorough as possible.

Following the coding process, the researchers discussed and compared their findings and determined the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the participants’ stories. It is important to note that many of the stories contained information that fit into multiple themes and subthemes. For example, one participant described how she began participating in the race because of encouragement from her sisters, who also participated. This portion of her story fit with the “family” theme. The same participant also described overcoming an accident that severely damaged her legs in order to run the race, and this portion of the story fit within the “survive to thrive” theme. In these instances, the stories were coded into multiple themes.

The researchers took steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. This was established via triangulation, researcher debriefing sessions, and negative case analysis (Guba, 1981; Patton, 1999; Shenton, 2004). First, triangulation was utilized through the use of a wide range of study participants. For this method of establishing trustworthiness, Shenton (2004) stated, “Here individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people” (p. 66). Researcher debriefing sessions involved in-depth conversations among the three researchers about the themes and subthemes that emerged from data analysis. These sessions allowed the researchers to more accurately define the study’s themes. Negative case analysis involved examining the data after all coding was completed. This allowed the researchers to determine whether any outlier cases did not fit the established themes. For example, one participant spoke extensively of the concept of time and wrote a poem about time making her bolder. This was the only time this topic or theme appeared in the data, and therefore it was eliminated from further analysis.

Results

Participants provided oral or written narratives about their BolderBOULDER experience. Within this section, pseudonyms were given to participants reflecting the gender of the respondent. Four major themes emerged from these stories: family, health, the event experience, and empowerment. The four themes were each analyzed and subthemes emerged for each of the four main themes (see Table 1).

Family (Social Facilitator)
The overarching theme that occurred most often, to the point of saturation, was family. Over half of the participants discussed family as a reason they run BolderBOULDER, which was supported by the emerging subthemes of tradition, in memory of, friendly competition, and bonding. As the quotes provided later in this section suggest, family was unique as a motive for the behavior of running, and one that has
led to allegiance to BolderBOULDER for multiple family members.

**Tradition.** Many of the participants talked about running BolderBOULDER with family members over a number of years. Adults talked about running the race with a family member (parent or other family member) as a child and about continuing to run the race with their family member(s), which often included the next generation. They spoke of the event and the race as a family tradition (i.e., something that the family does together, something that they have been doing together for a number of years, and something to be passed down to the next generation). Running BolderBOULDER as a family tradition was exemplified in the following quotes:

“Bolder Boulder day” is my favorite day of the year. It is a family tradition for me to run in the big race….Last year my 7-year-old grandson decided to join the family tradition and ran with us as well. (Marla)

My husband…daughters…and I have been running the BolderBOULDER together since 2003. It is “our family thing,” more important to us than any other time of year. (Jazlyn)

My dad and I have been running the BolderBOULDER together for many years…now I am out of college and working, but my dad and I still try to drive to “meet in the middle” to run the BolderBOULDER each year. (Virginia)

**In memory of.** Participants also talked about running BolderBOULDER in memory of a family member who had died or who was ill. The race often had significance for the family member that it was run in memory of. As a way to honor that person or show their support, family came together to run the race. Rose and Nikki spoke of this in the following excerpts:

My two sisters and I lost our dad in 2005 at age 48 to ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease). He ran the BolderBOULDER five times from 1985-1991. We decided what better race to run together to honor and celebrate the life of our dad. (Rose)

BolderBOULDER 2009, though in the last stages of cancer, my brother ran his 13th and last race. It was through running races that the doctor thought he endured his race with cancer as well as he did. On his death bed I told him, “I guess I’ll have to run for you next year.” That was how “Team Eric” got started. (Nikki)

**Friendly competition.** Running the race served as a form of friendly competition between family members. For some, sibling or family rivalry started their tradition of running the race. It started with a challenge such as, “I’ll bet you can’t do it” or “I’ll bet you can’t run that far,” which had to be met with running the race. In one of the narratives, a younger cousin bet an older cousin that she could not run a 10K, thus starting a tradition of running the race together.

**Bonding.** The race was considered an important time for family members to come together and be together. Family members who could not run the race often were mentioned as part of the support crew. Family members coming together to run the race “in memory of” was also an important bonding experience as illustrated in the previous quotes in the “in memory of” subtheme.

The quotes under the theme of family demonstrate the social facilitation facet of the SCT and point to the behavior of allegiance, with multiple decades having passed in which members of families influenced new or younger family members to begin and continue running the race. Among the previous studies examining race participation, this finding stands alone as a unique contribution to the literature.

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<td>Themes and Subthemes from “I Am Bolder” Analysis</td>
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The second most prominent theme, the “event” experience was also found to be unique in comparison to
previously identified motives. Although Filo et al. (2011) discussed related motives such as socialization or socializing with other people, and Eagleman and Hack (2011) reported affiliation as a key motive, no previous researchers directly identified the centrality of the event experience as a structural facilitator.

Subthemes identified under this major theme included the event, loyalty, and Memorial Day.

**Event.** Participants talked about the fun of the event, including the live music and entertainment at every corner, the atmosphere of celebration, the pride of accomplishment, the finish line experience, and finishing in front of a large crowd in Folsom Field. A quote that describes the unique event experience for those who participate was:

> Whether you have run 30 races or one there are some great memories: the fun costumes, the bands and dancers along the course, the skydivers. People love this race and it is easy to see why it brings so many people together. (Angeline)

**Loyalty.** Participants talked about their loyalty to the BolderBOULDER race specifically. Many mentioned running consecutive BolderBOULDER races, traveling home to either Boulder or Colorado from other states to race, or running the “race” in another place to not miss out on the event.

> Although I have lived in a few different states the race has brought me home every year. It is a holiday I love to come spend with my family. (Angeline)

> One year, Cara and Callie were in China over Memorial Day. They didn’t want to miss out on our fun day back home, so they hosted their own BolderBOULDER[in China]. (Marla)

**Memorial Day.** A unique aspect of the BolderBOULDER race, which may provide it with an advantage over other road races, is that it occurs on Memorial Day. This holiday celebrates the men and women who died while serving in the United States’ armed forces, and involves a three-day weekend for most working Americans. It is traditionally a time for families and friends to have gatherings that often involve food, drinks, and leisure activities such as games or sports. Participants spoke of running the race to honor or pay tribute to other people, including veterans or family members.

> I will do what my family has done since 1979 on Memorial Day, I will run in Memory of Mary Lou, after all it is Memorial Day. I will run/walk with a heavy heart and a boldness that has been instilled in me. (Ned)

The event experience theme is unique to this study, yet when we consider the recent surge in unique participant race experiences, such as color runs, in which participants are sprayed with an array of colors during the race, or mud runs and obstacle course-based runs, we see that the event experience has become a focal point among both participants and race officials. Yet, what remains to be seen in these newer themed events is the number of participants who choose to repeat the experience in following years, leading to longevity of the race. As expressed by BolderBOULDER participants, the event experience is one that they purposefully seek to repeat again and again.

Repeat racers have established the race as one of America’s favorite 10K races, pointing further to the value inherent in understanding the behavior manifesting as allegiance to this event. Viewed under the lens of SCT, the event experience theme illustrates the relationship between race participation and the “structural” environment that serves as a facilitator for the behavior of running the race, and how the “structural environment” contributed to participants’ sense of allegiance towards the event.

**Health (Knowledge/Outcome Expectation/Goals)**

Over half of the participants talked about health as a reason why they run the race. This theme also emerged to the point of saturation. Subthemes that were identified under health included getting healthy, survive to thrive, defying the odds, and celebrating life.

**Getting healthy.** Several participants talked about using BolderBOULDER as the goal and the motivation to get healthy. For most participants who identified getting healthy as a motivation, the focus of training for and running the race was to lose weight or reduce stress as highlighted in the following quotes:

> A year ago I began running in earnest to get back to a healthy weight. I have lost 30 pounds, dropped three dress sizes, and I am very close to my goal of a sub-60 BolderBOULDER. (Jenna)

> Just over three years ago I was struggling to care for a very sick infant, was 30 pounds overweight, and was severely depressed … [after training for BolderBOULDER] … I was a new person. I was slimmer, better able to cope with the life stressors, and determined instead of defeated and hopeless. (Ashley)

> Running the 2013 BolderBOULDER was as lofty as my goal of losing over 100 pounds. In less than
six months I had lost 30 pounds and was ready to start integrating running into my workouts. (Bradley)

**Survive to thrive.** A second subtheme to emerge under health was survive to thrive. Different from participants who used training for BolderBOULDER to lose weight or reduce stress, these participants were recovering from serious illness or injury and used the race to show themselves and others (sometimes their disease) that they were healthy, strong, and capable of meeting a physical challenge. The quote below shows how a participant runs the race to say “I have survived and I am thriving”:

I was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis when I was 16. My sophomore year at CU-Boulder, I had my large intestine removed. I almost died in surgery. My road to recovery was long and tiresome, but I survived. My first race afterwards was the 2010 BolderBOULDER. I ran that race and every race since to prove I am strong and that ulcerative colitis did not defeat me. (Wes)

**Defying odds.** Another theme to emerge under health was defying odds. Unlike the two previous subthemes, participants talked about running the race even though they were told they would not be able to or should not run the race. Edwin talked about completing the race after surviving a hit-and-run accident with multiple fractures.

February 20th, 2007; I was a victim of a hit and run … bi-lateral fractures of my pelvis, three broken vertebrae, three broken ribs, a partial collapsed lung, broken clavicle, and broken scapula, were only the beginning. Less than 100 days after the hit and run (and against all my doctor’s suggestions) I finished my 11th consecutive BolderBOULDER. (Edwin)

**Celebrating life.** The final subtheme to emerge under health was celebrating life after recovering from a near-death experience. Participants ran the race to celebrate the fact that they were alive.

I am so excited to celebrate life one more time at the BolderBOULDER in Colorado with my daughter Keri! Every doctor I have tells me my recovery is a miracle. (Lindsey)

My first race was just five months after heart surgery, the 2010 BolderBOULDER. (Scott)

**Empowerment (Self-Efficacy)**
The final major theme to emerge from the BolderBOULDER race narratives was empowerment. Subthemes identified under empowerment included becoming a runner, success/pride, and inspiration.

**Becoming a runner.** Participants talked about how training for and/or running the race became the springboard for them to become runners and/or athletes. The quotes below exemplify how BolderBOULDER was the impetus for their transformation:

After successfully walking the 2011 BolderBOULDER, in October of that year I ran my first 5K in Oklahoma City. Since then I have participated in six more runs. (Lana)

Little did I know my first BolderBOULDER in 2005 would be the start of my journey to becoming an athlete. I completed my first half marathon six months later, and my first full marathon a year after that. I still love to run, and with the self-assurance I built starting in Boulder I’ve pushed myself even farther than I would have dreamed. (Priscilla).

I will never forget my friend asking me to run a 10k with her called the BolderBOULDER 6 years ago … I couldn’t even run three miles. Five years and 25 pounds later I have run many 10ks, one full marathon, over seven half marathons, a 10-miler, Spartan Race, Tough Mudder, and other races. (Arleen)

**Success/Pride.** The second subtheme identified under empowerment was success/pride, in this case as defined by the participants. For some, success was simply finishing the distance while for others success meant running the race instead of walking it. Participants also talked of pride in their accomplishment. Often this pride came from doing more than they thought they could and exceeding their own expectations.

Whether you’re trying to set a record, win your age group, break a personal best or just cross the finish line—to race is to embrace the pursuit of a goal. (Chirsty)

I said … that I didn’t care if I was the last person in, I was by-god going for it, just for the experience. After I came in, realizing in amazement that there were lots of people behind me … I was far from being the last one! (Madelyn)

**Inspiration.** The final subtheme under empowerment was inspiration. Participants spoke of running the race as being an inspiration for themselves or others. Inspiration went beyond being proud or feeling
successful because of completing one BolderBOULDER 10k race. Instead, preparing for the race also inspired them to embark on a longer-term journey of self-improvement as highlighted in the following quote:

My journey began three long years ago. At the young age of 18 … I was tipping the scale at 270 pounds. A friend challenged me to step outside my comfort zone and train for the BB10K with him. After one year of training, I had lost 105 pounds and I was in the best cardio shape I had ever been in and I was anxiously looking forward to my first 10K. I had my doubts of whether or not I could run the whole course without stopping. To my surprise, I ran the entire course without stopping, and finished 30 minutes ahead of my projected time. I haven’t slowed down since then. To date, I’ve lost 120 pounds and now I am training for my second half marathon. (Abbey)

Discussion

Prior to this study, few researchers have focused on the determinants of participant behavior specific to a road race event. To contribute to this limited line of inquiry, our analysis focused on the BolderBOULDER 10K race, by analyzing digital content created by race participants. While some themes were consistent with previous research, the two themes of family and the “event” experience differed from previous studies and demonstrate the importance of both social and structural facilitation in road race participation.

Participatory sporting event organizers can develop a sense of allegiance among participants by recognizing the importance of family and the event experience. To better understand how loyalty or allegiance as behavioral outcomes can be achieved, we consider SCT in framing the evidence provided through the themes identified in this study.

The SCT includes key determinants believed to influence participation in activities such as competitive running (Bandura, 2004). The most powerful predictor of physical activity behavior is self-efficacy or a person’s belief that they can successfully perform the behavior, like train for and complete (run or walk) a 10K. An initial step in the decision-making process that results in participation in a physical activity is awareness/knowledge (Barnett, 2005). In this initial phase, socializing agents, cultural influences, and the structural environment influence knowledge and realization of participation opportunities (Beaton et al., 2011). The family theme was marked by socializing agents (social environment) including family members who educated those not previously aware of the race, and thereby increased their knowledge leading to realization of participation opportunities. Similarly, family members shared stories of how they used friendly competition to motivate one another, and thereby act as facilitators in the social environment. This is supported by previous studies extolling the value external influences such as family and peers can have on the construction of a person’s desired identity (Moschis, 2007; Vignoles et al., 2008).

Similarly, social facilitators and the event environment were identified as factors aligned with the structural environment (Bandura, 2004; Beaton et al., 2011). From this study we see how friends, the environment marked by the Boulder running community, the recent running boom, and status of the BolderBOULDER as one of America’s favorite 10Ks all contribute to generating motivation linked to structural environment facilitation (Bandura, 2004). This is further supported by Williams et al. (1992), who found environmental factors can explain why people are attracted to recreational experiences such as road races. This points to how the event experience can be used to differentiate a road race from the competition.

Similarly, the social situational context plays a key role (Beaton et al., 2011; Crompton & McKay, 1997) in the outcomes such as attitude formation and affective association. Personal determinants stimulate engagement in the activity, or in this case, road race. Factors that can be directly attributed to the themes emerging from this study include empowerment demonstrating enhanced self-efficacy; health as related to alignment of goal and outcome expectations; and the family theme contributing to the positive social environment that came from taking part in the race as a family tradition (see Table 1).

The SCT supports the notion that motivation can be fluid, suggesting as greater meaning is assigned to the activity (event) motivation increases and/or is reinforced. Here the interpersonal themes of empowerment and health were related to motivation. A person is very unlikely to participate in a behavior that he or she has no or little belief that he or she will successfully accomplish. However, when a person successfully engages in a behavior it tends to increase self-efficacy and the likelihood that he or she will repeat the behavior (Bandura, 2004). The subtheme of empowerment derived from running related directly to the participant’s dispositional needs, and self-efficacy emerged as runners overcame perceived barriers. This was particularly true when the barriers were self-imposed limitations, such as inability to complete the race distance or lose desired weight. Yet, this psychological connection is relatively unstable, given it is derived from the pleasure aligned with the sport, or in this case, road race. When an individual begins to ascribe greater meaning
to the sport or event, movement toward self-efficacy has been initiated. This is where the influence of the empowerment theme became more prominent as related directly to participation behavior, affective association, and positive attitude formation (see Table 1).

For example, the empowerment theme was marked by individuation or differentiation of self from others (meaning no longer being overweight or unhealthy), along with integration of the self with others in the “becoming a runner” subtheme. At this point, the event (activity) assumes deeper meaning with links emerging between the behavior (running), self-efficacy and goal-outcome expectation alignment. Perhaps most critically, “Behavioral outcomes become more contingent upon individual, rather than sociological processes” (Beaton et al., 2011, p. 131) as was reflected by the intersection of themes. With a more stable psychological connection realized, individuals become more likely to inhibit or resist alternatives, and are less sensitive to changes compared to people in earlier behavioral stages. For race organizers, this psychological connection becomes a worthy goal to realize, as in this case, when there are multiple competing options for activities on Memorial Day in the US. For runners within this study, their attachment to the BolderBOULDER race resulted in inhibition of alternatives. Here the subthemes of honoring others and family tradition worked toward attitude strengthening and continuance of the experience as an annual family event. This stability between the individual and activity marks another key objective of race organizers when seeking to build or grow participation in an annual event.

Perhaps most notably for event organizers and sport managers, the overarching frame for nearly every submission to the contest was the concept of allegiance or loyalty. As defined by Park and Kim (2000), loyalty involves two dimensions: behavioral, which they described as “the degree to which a participant purchases a service or program repeatedly” (p. 198), and attitudinal, which they described as “the process of attaching psychologically to a selected recreational sport program” (p. 198). Both loyalty dimensions were evident in multiple themes, but clearly the two most prominent and unique themes of family and the event experience provided substantial evidence of how loyalty has evolved for the race.

As we consider the themes in relation to SCT, the BolderBOULDER participants demonstrated points for elevating their loyalty, which can be instructive for race organizers. As stated in the Introduction, the popularity of road races worldwide points to increasing competition between events for participants. As race participants are quite attractive to event organizers from an economic perspective, there are clear benefits for sport managers who understand the motives leading to behavioral allegiance for their road race events. This knowledge can be utilized to differentiate their race from competitors, grow participation numbers, and establish a stronger brand presence in the ever-expanding running industry.

In sum, the research conducted prior to this study had not considered the SCT to examine the behavior of road race participants incorporating a qualitative approach. Previously, very little was known about the contribution of specific constructs of behavior toward development of road race participant allegiance and event loyalty. This study built upon previous work to demonstrate how family and the event experience can serve to advance race participants towards increasingly higher levels of allegiance. As two new core determinants were identified, future surveys and quantitative studies should incorporate these key findings. While participants’ BolderBOULDER race experiences may not be broadly generalized to similar road races, the level of allegiance aligned with this race was undeniable. Through this glimpse into participants’ identification with this race, as phrased “I am Bolder,” we have been able to gain insights worthy of consideration among race organizers, those seeking sponsors, and sport scholars.

**Limitations**

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the BolderBOULDER is the date on which the race is held. Memorial Day in the United States is symbolic as a day to recognize people who sacrificed their lives through service to their country. Many families use this day to gather and remember family members and friends. The core themes identified supported the strength of the influence this traditional holiday has on the event. Without question most road races are not coordinated with a major holiday, and therefore the impact of this particular holiday on this event must be noted. Nonetheless, sport managers considering themes for new races or events, as well as potential dates, may look to this example to see the benefits accrued, as well as the drawbacks aligned with an event on a national holiday. Future research may look specifically at holiday-themed events to determine if specific themes, such as family, resonate more strongly with these types of events.

An additional limitation of this study is that only those participants who chose to submit a story to the “I am Bolder” contest were analyzed. Because of this self-selection, it is likely that the sample was quite highly identified with the event. While this provides
useful data from the perspective of understanding why such loyalty exists and how it was built, additional data from first-time participants or participants who felt lower levels of loyalty to the event would provide additional results from which to draw conclusions. It is recommended that future researchers attempt to capture the experiences of participants from wide-ranging identification levels.

Conclusions

The themes and subthemes discovered in this study revealed components that assist in building participant behaviors related to repeating the experience, including family tradition leading to allegiance to the race. While the findings of this study are unique to the BolderBOULDER 10K, the revelation of the two themes (family and the event experience) in relation to participant allegiance can be used by sport marketers and managers of similar road race events in attempts to build increasingly higher levels of participation in their events over time.

Additionally, these findings hold implications for sport management researchers. The results add to the limited body of literature on participatory sport behavior while offering a foundation from which future qualitative and participatory event-specific research can be conducted. Although we did not test the participants’ loyalty levels, it is thought that most participants in this research were highly identified with the event since they chose to write a story or submit a video to the “I am Bolder” contest. We recommend that future research attempts to examine participants of varying degrees of allegiance using SCT to determine what differences exist among these groups. Additionally, mixed methods research involving quantitative survey measures combined with qualitative data would provide richer results from which to draw conclusions.

References


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