

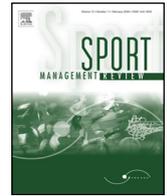


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Sporting hyperchallenges: Health, social, and fiscal implications

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ABSTRACT

There has been a rise in sport-focused event management organisations staging increasingly challenging quests for amateur athletes. Whilst endeavours such as running a marathon or completing an Ironman triathlon were previously pinnacle achievements for amateur athletes, sporting hyperchallenges, events covering greater distances, crossing more difficult terrain, or posing more extreme challenges have set the performance bar significantly higher. Cast against Western neoliberal backdrops the ever-expanding supply-side of this market is broadening opportunities for amateur athletes to test their physical limits, thus necessitating investment of inordinate personal resources. Simultaneously, there is growing empirical and anecdotal evidence suggesting unfavourable impacts can flow from intensely pursuing extreme endurance sports including impacts to athletes' health and relationships. The authors draw upon intertwined theories of business ethics and corporate social responsibility to critique business practices of sport-focused event management organisations delivering sporting hyperchallenges. The authors propose a conceptual framework aimed at encouraging future research into potential health, social, and fiscal implications stemming from this complex, unregulated market.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we addresses supply and demand aspects of a segment of participatory sport events, sporting hyperchallenges, an emerging phenomenon which require amateur athletes to push the boundaries of human strength and endurance above and beyond traditional athletic challenges. Lamont and Jenkins (2013) characterise participatory sport events, such as marathons, triathlons, ocean swims, and outdoor adventure races, as open to all, thus catering for amateur athletes of varying skill levels, through various distances and levels of challenge. At the extreme end of the participatory sport event spectrum are sporting hyperchallenges, characterised by distances and/or challenge levels eclipsing traditional event formats for endurance sports and requiring amateur athletes to invest significantly in physical and mental preparation. Examples of sporting hyperchallenges include the Ultraman triathlon (10 km swim, 421.1 km cycle, 84.3 km run), the 6633 Arctic Ultra in the Canadian Arctic (a 563 km ultramarathon), the 217 km Badwater 135 ultramarathon in Death Valley, California, or the 243 km Speight's Coast to Coast adventure race in New Zealand (Clarke, 2015). As we will discuss, sporting

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hyperchallenges might also extend beyond traditional endurance sports and include other extremely challenging event formats such as the CrossFit Games.

Participatory sport events have burgeoned in popularity recently (Kennelly, 2017). Murphy, Lane, and Bauman (2015) described such events as “levers to encourage people to become physically active and improve their health” (p. 1). Scholars (i.e., Crofts, Schofield, & Dickson, 2012; Murphy et al., 2015; Sato, Jordan, & Funk, 2016) have cast participatory sport events in a positive light as vehicles to promote adoption of healthy lifestyles. Researchers have established that participants often find their involvement in endurance sport events rewarding through goal setting and achievement, identity development, and opportunities to socialise with other members of a sporting social world (Atkinson, 2008; Lamont, Kennelly, & Wilson, 2012; McCarville, 2007; Shipway & Jones, 2007).

In particular, sociologists have examined social worlds in the context of endurance sports, paying particular attention to the social construction and celebration of pain and athletic suffering. Neophytes are socialised to embrace exercise-induced pain, with one’s ability to withstand pain producing cultural capital through which identity is constructed and social status ascribed (Bridel, 2015; Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012). Nixon’s (1993) analysis of discourse around pain and injury within *Sports Illustrated* magazine concluded that athletes are socialised into cultural norms of embracing pain, taking risks with their health, and not complaining about discomfort despite possible physical, emotional, and economic costs. Relatedly, television broadcasts of athletes’ heroic battles with their failing bodies, such as triathlete Julie Moss infamously crawling to the Hawaiian Ironman finish line in 1982, have fuelled growing interest in endurance sports over the past three decades (Bridel, 2015). Conquering endurance challenges embodies values of toughness and discipline, producing for the middle classes what Atkinson (2008) describes as “exciting significance” (p. 167), a counterbalance to increasingly mundane, civilised societies. Moreover, endurance sports provide a backdrop where women may challenge discourses of sport as a bastion of masculinity. Such events provide a space for women to pursue empowerment and to challenge patriarchal values traditionally embedded within sport (Bridel, 2015; Cronan & Scott, 2008).

Bridel (2013, 2015) suggests the growing popularity of endurance challenges has been fuelled by discourses of obesity in contemporary Western societies. Popular culture features of remarkable lifestyle transformations abound, such as contestants on television programs like *The Biggest Loser*, who shed considerable weight and go on to compete in endurance challenges. Bridel (2013) described how the narratives surrounding such lifestyle transformations inspired the embracing of pain to compensate for one’s supposed, previous lack of self-control in maintaining good health. As Atkinson (2008) theorised, lean, toned bodies produced through vigorous physical training are valorised by participants within endurance sport social worlds. Athletic bodies become a symbolic representation of one’s commitment to strict training regimes and dietary control, values that further bind members of these communities together and differentiate such groups from mainstream, sedentary Western lifestyles (Bridel, 2013). However, beyond limited sociological and sport science literature, scholars have devoted minimal consideration to more extreme forms of participatory sport events.

Further, while previous researchers focusing on participatory sport events typically position them as contributing favourably to participants’ physical, mental, and social wellbeing, some scholars have signaled potentially adverse impacts on participants’ health and significant relationships (Lamont et al., 2012; Major, 2001). As Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, and Hinckson (2013) discussed, governments along with state-sponsored sport governing bodies increasingly grapple with broadening modes of sport participation. These agencies face a conundrum in deploying resources to satisfy elite performance objectives weighed against promoting sport for community wellbeing purposes. However, as our paper seeks to demonstrate, adverse outcomes arising from obsessive pursuit of extreme participatory sport events may undermine strategies aimed at facilitating grass-roots sport for community wellbeing. Hence, there may be a heightened need for policies encouraging prudent grass-roots sport participation as opposed to pursuing loosely defined increased participation objectives.

In this conceptual paper, we position sporting hyperchallenges as extreme forms of participatory sport events. We question whether sporting hyperchallenges are effective vehicles for promoting healthy outcomes and raise questions around the management and marketing of these events. In doing so, we challenge idealistic and myopic views of all participatory sport events as levers for improving community health. Shadowing the approach adopted by Powers and Greenwell (2017) in their critique of branded fitness movements (i.e., CrossFit and Bikram Yoga), we draw upon extant scholarly research (i.e., on participatory sport events, as well as movements such as CrossFit), and popular culture sources to explore implications flowing from sporting hyperchallenges.

As we shall elucidate, it is possible that sporting hyperchallenge participation may result in harm to participants and those close to them. We therefore discuss how event management organisations could adopt a range of strategies to reduce potential unfavourable impacts of their events, whilst simultaneously leveraging benefits from sporting hyperchallenge participation. Motivated by emerging empirical evidence and anecdotal evidence from popular culture sources, the key aim of our critique is to propose a conceptual framework aimed at encouraging researchers to understand better potential health, social, and fiscal implications of the unregulated sporting hyperchallenge market. We pose five broad questions relating to: (a) potential adverse health and social impacts on participants stemming from intense pursuit of amateur endurance sports; (b) the relationship between particular business practices of event management organisations and endurance sport social world hierarchies; (c) the role of neoliberalism in facilitating sporting hyperchallenges; (d) the potential social and fiscal implications of sporting hyperchallenge participation; and (e) how sporting hyperchallenge event management organisations might be encouraged to enhance their business practices to better align with business ethics and corporate social responsibility principles.

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