A qualitative study into the development of a physical activity legacy from the London 2012 Olympic Games

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SUMMARY

Olympic Games have sometimes been considered as public health interventions capable of improving population health by encouraging increased physical activity levels. However, the evidence base does not appear to support this and is of poor quality, focussing on population level outcomes, usually related only to participation in organised sports. A new approach to research into the effects of such events is required focussing on the processes and mechanisms by which population physical activity levels might be increased enabling more effective use of such events in the future. Two separate processes, the ‘demonstration effect’ and ‘festival effect,’ have been proposed in Government guidance and are explored using qualitative methods in eight inactive people and four physical activity promotion specialists in Brighton & Hove. The findings appear to support the idea that watching elite athletes compete is unlikely to inspire participation among inactive people and may even discourage it by reducing self-efficacy as a result of the perceived competence gap. Despite this, positive attitudes towards the London Olympics were observed among inactive members of the public and a desire to become actively involved in the event. Examples of intention to continue participating in community events and physical activities as a result of positive experiences of Olympic related events were also observed.

Key words: physical activities; sport; qualitative methods; sedentary behaviour

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the British Government claimed that hosting the 2012 Olympic Games in London would make the nation ‘fitter and healthier’. In a country with some of the highest rates of obesity in Europe and the majority of the population failing to perform the Chief Medical Officer’s recommendations for physical activity, increasing numbers of people engaging in physically active lifestyles is clearly of great public health importance (DoH, 2009). As a result, although later distancing themselves from this figure, the Government included an ambitious target of getting two million more adults active by 2012 in their Olympic Legacy Action Plan (DCMS, 2008).

Despite these lofty ambitions, there is little evidence available to support the idea that people are encouraged to adopt physically active lifestyles as a result of Olympic Games or other major sporting events. A systematic review by Weed et al. (Weed et al., 2009) found that no good quality evidence existed to show that any previous Games had succeeded in encouraging the adoption of physically active lifestyles either through organized sport or informal, everyday physical activity. The evidence that does exist regarding participation in physical activity among host populations of major sporting events has often focused on participation in organized sporting events. While this aspect of physical activity undoubtedly has a role to play in developing an
active population, it has been shown unlikely to encourage many of the least active people which is where the majority of the public health gains stand to be made (Weed et al., 2009). In addition, it is often noted that there is a difficulty in attributing any changes found specifically to the sporting event where before and after studies have shown an impact on participation. No studies have used well-designed quasi-experimental designs with multiple pre- and post-event population measures with comparison communities and regions (Murphy and Bauman, 2007). An example of research featuring these inadequacies is a study into the effects of the Barcelona Games of 1992 which showed that there was an increase in participation between 1985 and 1995 (London East Research Institute, 2007). As the authors state, these findings could be due to a wide range of factors beside the Olympics and further add that the figures are taken from different surveys with possible compatibility issues. In any case, other similarly designed studies have failed to replicate this finding. For example, Bauman et al. (Bauman et al., 2001) studied national physical activity levels in Australia before and after the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. They found no significant change in the percentage of adults doing enough physical activity for health benefits from 1999 to 2000 (56.6 and 56.8%, respectively), although this did follow a significant decline from 62.2% in 1997. Additionally, they reported that the levels of sedentary behaviour increased from 14.6% in 1999 to 15.3% in 2000, following an upward trend from 13.4% in 1997. Despite this, there were also some positive findings from this research which was conducted 6 weeks after the Olympics closing ceremony. Four percent of the adults surveyed reported that they had done some physical activity as a direct result of Australia hosting the event, although this was not enough to cause an increase in the prevalence of those sufficiently active for health. Furthermore, the proportion of adults intending to be physically active in the next month increased from 34.4% in 1999 to 36.9% in 2000 which again followed an upward trend following an increase from 31.5% in 1997.

Research commissioned by UK Sport in Greater Manchester, Blackburn, Congleton and Liverpool following the Manchester Commonwealth Games of 2002 using population data collected by MORI, also showed no impact on participation in sports activities in either the last 4 weeks or 12 months (MORI, 2004). The only relevant positive finding made in this study was that local satisfaction with green spaces increased following the event. Survey data around the period of the 2008 Olympic Games—in which the British team achieved unprecedented success—suggest that they did not bring about any increase in physical activity (HSE, 2008) or sports participation (APS, 2010/11).

In summary, there is little evidence available to assess the likely impact of the London 2012 Olympics in terms of delivering a physical activity legacy and the evidence that does exist is of a poor standard. However, the information that is available and the recognized difficulties in achieving impacts on population physical activity levels from any single initiative suggest that the prospects of realizing a legacy of a more physically active population simply as a result of hosting the London 2012 Olympics is slim. This is recognized in the Weed et al. (Weed et al., 2009) review which states that ‘the 2012 Games or any major sports event, is not a magic bullet to raise participation in physical activity or sport, or to encourage positive health behaviours.

Potential mechanisms
The focus of previous studies, such as those outlined above, on population level outcomes has meant little or no research has investigated the mechanisms by which an Olympic Games might influence the population. Furthermore, focussing on the outcome of participation levels in organized sports appears to assume that the principal mechanism by which such an event might influence the wider population is a simple observe and copy effect which has been termed a ‘trickle down’ effect or more recently by the Department of Health (DoH) in 2010, the ‘demonstration effect’ mechanism. However, even if this was a viable mechanism by which physical activity levels could be increased, it is unlikely to impact on the most inactive people, many of whom are likely to be uninterested in organized sports participation. Instead, the most likely impact of the demonstration effect is thought to be increasing the frequency of participation in those already involved (DoH, 2010). Further to this, there is also the possibility, as suggested by Hindson et al. (Hindson et al., 1994), that viewing elite athletes may inspire some people but actually deter others due to the perceived competence gap.

Despite this lack of understanding of possible mechanisms, research into other aspects of Olympic legacies such as volunteering and tourism have provided some useful insight into how people
may be engaged and influenced by the Games (e.g. ICRC, 2003; Kim and Chalip, 2004; Ohmann et al., 2006). The research suggests that if an Olympic Games can create a celebratory atmosphere which people want to be actively involved in, as opposed to simply watching passively at home, then this desire can be harnessed to engage people in such activities. The UK Department of Health’s guidance for local areas to develop a physical activity legacy suggests that this desire to be actively involved may also be capable of engaging people in physically active events (DoH, 2010). Once people have been engaged in this way, a positive experience in terms of enjoyment, social connection and community spirit may see them develop a desire to continue to engage in physical activity in the future. This process has been called the ‘festival effect’ and is placed alongside, but separate from, the demonstration effect. The distinction is made on a number of levels including the benefits the festival effect offers to the individual (such as socialization, enjoyment and fun), the values it promotes (such as eco, cultural and community values) and the type of people it can influence, namely sedentary, disengaged people with negative attitudes towards organized competitive sport.

The demonstration and festival effects are the two mechanisms put forward by the DoH as possible ways that the Games may influence physical activity levels. This study uses qualitative methods to explore these mechanisms in people leading inactive lives in Brighton & Hove during the London 2012 Olympic Games.

**METHODS**

**Study participants**

Members of the public were recruited and interviewed until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new ideas or themes emerged (Parahoo, 1997). A total of eight members of the public were interviewed, four were recruited from the local exercise referral scheme (ERS) and four from an Olympic themed local community event (CE). Those on the ERS had been referred within the last 3 months and had previously been leading a sedentary lifestyle. The aim was to obtain a sample of people who were not currently active enough to meet the government recommendations but were either thinking about becoming more active or already taking early steps towards this. All participants confirmed they were not currently meeting the recommendations using a validated, single-item physical activity question (Milton et al., 2011). By joining the ERS in the last 3 months and attending the CE, it is likely that participants had taken steps towards becoming more active or were considering it.

The four participants from the ERS were recruited from a possible six people who fitted the criteria (not currently meeting physical activity recommendations and referred within the last 3 months). The two remaining people refused the study due to lack of interest or time. The four participants from the CE were recruited by the project lead when they approached event staff for information about the activities available. Nine people declined to take part, also citing time and lack of interest as reasons. The sample size was not predetermined, as recruitment for the interviews was stopped when data saturation was achieved. The notion of ‘thematic saturation’ is a pragmatic one and does not precisely determine a minimum sample size (Guest et al., 2006). The criterion for determining at which point data saturation had occurred was therefore agreed as being confirmed by two interviews in a row producing no new themes, an approach reported by Weir et al. (Weir et al., 2010).

A convenience sample of four professionals working in the Local Authority or NHS with a remit to develop a physical activity legacy from the Olympic Games was also taken and interviewed with a view to providing an additional perspective to the data collected from members of the public. The professional roles ranged from running physical activity sessions for sedentary adults in the area to commissioning sports and physical activity programmes.

Ethical approval was given by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Research Ethics Committee in April 2012 and written informed consent was received from study participants.

**Data collection and analysis**

Semi-structured, one-one in-depth interviews based on a topic guide were used to allow a detailed exploration of participants’ views and experiences of the London Olympic Games. All interviews were conducted in a 2-week period during the Games and were recorded to improve
accuracy of the analysis process. The topic guide was developed to reflect the dual processes identified from background research and policy, namely the demonstration effect and festival effect. It included the following topic areas that the interviewer introduced to elicit participant views and experiences: (i) identification with elite athletes and copying of behaviour; (ii) observation of elite performance and self-efficacy; (iii) attitudes towards the Olympic Games and London 2012; (iv) experience of personal involvement in the Games; (v) intentions for future behaviour. The dual processes provided the basic framework used during analysis of the results to manage, describe and explore the original data. All interviews were fully transcribed before a thematic analysis was performed using this framework. Short sections of data were coded with brief verbal descriptions before related codes were grouped together to form themes and to identify conflicting and deviant opinions. Key quotes from members of the public were selected during the analysis process and used to illustrate themes. Professional interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, in order that they felt able to speak freely, particularly if they wished to express negative views on the Games and so quotes from them are not directly assigned to individuals.

There were a number of checks on validity built into the study design. (i) A topic guide was used to ensure a similar range of topics was discussed with each participant. (ii) The four interviews conducted with professionals working to develop a physical activity legacy in the area allowed an additional perspective on the topic to be obtained. (iii) Interviews were continued until saturation of ideas and themes was achieved.

RESULTS

Interviews with members of the public

A total of eight members of the public were interviewed after which saturation was reached with no new ideas or themes emerging. Participants ranged from 31 to 52 years old and included five females. Seven of the sample were employed and all were from a white British background. Interviews ranged in length from 31 to 64 min.

Emergent themes are presented under the two key areas of the framework; the festival effect and demonstration effect processes. Verbatim quotes from the study participants are labelled in terms of their sex and age and whether they were recruited from the ERS or CE.

Demonstration effect

Seven members of the public felt that they could not identify with elite athletes in any way. Their achievements and lives were seen as entirely unrealistic to emulate and therefore there appeared to be no incentive to copy them in even a superficial way such as playing their sports for purely leisure purposes:

...I watched a documentary on the cyclists and how they cycle on an exercise bike until they can’t stand up and often collapse in training, I certainly wouldn’t want to try that. I’d rather watch them do that.’ (Male, 31, CE)

None of the participants felt they would be inspired to get involved in sports they see in the Olympics. Again this was because elite athletes are so far removed from normal people and their lives:

I read about Bradley Wiggins and his preparation for the cycling, he’s been sleeping in an oxygen tent for six months to improve his condition. No one will be able to do that, that won’t inspire anyone to take up cycling’ (Male, 41, CE)

Every participant interviewed was adamant that while elite athletes were unlikely to inspire them as adult members of the public they could definitely inspire children to take up sport. A number of people added that they felt this was probably the most important impact the Games could have on the country as it could tackle childhood obesity and occupy young people in positive activities:

My children are incredibly excited by it, especially seeing Team GB do well. They want to try every sport they see at the moment...I will try and give them the chance to get involved in some things afterwards for sure. Sport is such a positive thing for young people.’ (Female, 45, ERS)

It was felt that children were the best target group for promoting athletes as role models to because they are young and therefore still have a chance to become an athlete one day. It was also mentioned that they are impressionable and more likely to believe it is possible for them to emulate elite achievements.
One of the participants from the 2012 Play Day stated they had attended the event due to a request from their child to try some of the sports they had seen on TV and thought that it would be a good opportunity. This seems to suggest a possible demonstration effect on children which parents appear to play a key role in facilitating.

A concept discussed by five members of the public was that of a demotivating effect of seeing elite athletes perform at such a high standard. It was felt that the Olympics had reminded people of how hard it was to do a sport well and reduced self-confidence for participating:

The cycling... It did remind me what it would be like if I joined a gym... fit, toned people who tend to think they’re a bit special and would probably wonder what on earth I was doing there’ (Female, 52, CE)

Three people stated that simply the physical appearance of an elite athlete’s body meant it was difficult to imagine going to a gym or sports club to try something for fear of ridicule. It was also suggested that this could be reminding them of bad experiences of school sport when they were made to feel inferior to more talented, bigger and stronger pupils. Finally, half of the participants discussed how the Olympics being so competitive reinforced how important winning and losing is in sport which was felt to be off-putting for beginners.

Three participants stated that they felt they could relate more easily to paralympians who were not seen to be so naturally superior to normal people and showed that anyone can participate in sport in some way:

... the Paralympics, now that’s different they really are inspirational, if they can do it then I think we all ought to realise we can too ... ’ (Female, 52, CE)

Similarly, four participants stated that they thought that seeing local mass participation events with ‘real’ people taking part was more likely to inspire people to become physically active, particularly if the people involved were not particularly fit or in good shape physically:

People see mass participation events like the London Marathon on telly and see some slightly overweight person doing it and think “wow, if he can do it then I can do it”’ (Male, 31, CE)

A lack of emphasis on winning and more on taking part for fun as well as a visibly lower standard required were reasons suggested for this preference:

The Brighton marathon... that is completely different to the Olympics, it really surprises me actually the type of people that are able to run that far. I still don’t think that’s for me, it’s too much time but perhaps a shorter run like a Race for Life event or something... (Female, 45, ERS)

Festival effect

All participants interviewed were aware of the Games and seven of the eight held positive attitudes towards them feeling they would be both successful and enjoyable. A sense of pride was expressed over the Games being in their country and two stressed the fact that they were considerably more interested in these Olympics due to them being in London than they were in previous Games elsewhere:

I’m not particularly an Olympics fan normally and don’t watch a great deal but I’m definitely more interested because it’s our Olympics, it’s obviously more exciting this time in London (Female, 33, ERS)

However, the one sceptical participant expressed negative views due to the corporate nature of the event and high cost:

... I’m actually quite cynical about most professional sports... with so much corporate sponsorship these days rich people just get to watch it all from so much closer than everyone else and I feel that’s wrong (Male, 31, CE)

There was also a recognition that this was likely to be a once in a lifetime event in their country and that it was important to make the most of it. However, there was also concern from the majority of participants over the high cost of the event with some feeling the money should have been spent on other things such as the NHS.

There was a strong sense of ownership of the Games despite it being held in London with no events scheduled in Brighton & Hove. This was due to the fact that Brighton is so close to London geographically and also has strong ties in terms of people working there and many people from London visiting regularly. However, two participants talked about how they felt that this was unlikely to be the case in places further away such as Scotland and Manchester where people do not associate themselves at all with London.

Conflicting views were expressed by numerous participants regarding their expectations of the
Olympic Games and how they viewed their own personal involvement. All eight participants initially discussed the Olympics as an elite sporting competition and how the main role they saw themselves playing in the Games was passive spectating. Most people stated they had been or were looking forward to watching specific sports events on television or in some cases live at the venues. The opening and closing ceremonies were also mentioned but again only in terms of a passive viewing capacity. However, when prompted most also agreed that it had involved more than simply watching events and helped bring communities together. The main event that people discussed was the torch relay. This event had enabled people to achieve their desire to get involved and experience feeling part of the event:

...I went to the torch relay event in Hove Park actually, that was great. I don’t usually go into the park even though I live near it. I took my children on their bikes and they had a great time too, we enjoyed the atmosphere (Female, 36, ERS)

I did not want to let it just pass by and then think I wish I’d got more involved (Male, 41, CE)

Another example given was of an initiative put on by Brighton & Hove City Council which involved five group walks in Olympic ring shaped routes:

I saw this as a good way of people coming together to celebrate the Olympics as a community which is what’s important and I felt more involved after that (Female, 36, ERS)

Several participants compared the Games to recent royal celebrations such as the Queen’s diamond jubilee in that it is something to come together to celebrate as a country and local community:

The jubilee was fantastic, everyone enjoyed coming together for that and I think the same is happening for the Olympics. There are lots of opportunities to get into it organised by the Council or by ourselves among friends. (Female, 33, ERS)

Despite these positive experiences of involvement, three of the eight participants stated that the Games had not in any way influenced their intentions to become more physically active in the future or to participate in any regular activities or clubs and societies that they had not before. The main reason given was that while they supported the Olympics they expected it to be relatively quickly forgotten when it was over:

Don’t get me wrong I think it’s great but I don’t think it will have a long term impact on me. It’s a wonderful three week event but then life will return to normal (Female, 33, ERS)

It’s probably going to be like Wimbledon, great while it lasts but forgotten as soon as it finishes (Male, 39, CE)

However, one of the other participants stated that as a result of attending the torch relay event in a local park, they intended to try and make more use of their local public spaces including the parks and beaches:

...the event in the park...reminded us how good it is to do things like that as a family. Our park is great and we will be trying to make better use of it from now on (Female, 36, ERS)

I know there is a local physical activity scheme which is sociable and not just sports, if it’s like what I’ve experienced on the Olympic walk and at the celebration event I would consider that. (Female, 39, ERS)

Another participant was intending to take their child to the free swimming available in all pools in Brighton and swim with them at the same time having received information about it at this event:

My child saw an advert about the free swimming you can do here, I think the Olympics was important in getting started with that, he wants to swim having seen the events and I’ve wanted to get into something new for a long time, it’s actually quite sociable and has just given me a bit of a push (Female, 33, ERS)

There was intention from two participants to continue engaging in community activities, although it was not clear how they intended to do this and whether it would involve anything physically active:

I definitely think the community will remember the feel good factor from the Olympics and those connections maybe exist now where they did not before. I will continue to involve myself more now, yes (Female, 52, CE)

Interviews with professionals

Four professionals working for the Local Authority sports development or NHS public health department in the study area were
interviewed. Interviews ranged in length from 55 to 65 min and again themes are presented under the two framework areas of the festival and demonstration effects.

Demonstration effect

The professionals agreed with the public that the demonstration effect mechanism was very unlikely to be able to increase physical activity levels in adults that are currently, or have recently been, relatively inactive. They felt that the people in their communities were not interested in copying the behaviour of elite sportspeople and that this had not changed due to the Olympics. The reasoning for this was that there is no way of identifying with the athletes due to their high level of expertise and dedication, and also the physical appearance of their bodies:

Even if the Olympics is special, people have been exposed to high level sports all their lives in this country and if they’ve never been inspired before then that won’t change now. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone come to join a group as a result of seeing some sport on telly . . .

I personally feel quite inspired to copy the cyclists when I watch the road racing but I’ve been involved in sport all my life . . . if people aren’t engaged or interested already then it just doesn’t inspire them

The professionals reiterated the opinions of members of the public that further than simply not inspiring people, the perceived competence gap could serve as a demotivating influence on sedentary people:

The people in our sessions are certainly quite wary of embarrassing themselves and they can be quite reticent about getting up and exercising in front of other people. That’s another reason why these people aren’t inspired by Olympic athletes and can be put off completely by them, they increase that feeling of inadequacy.

They also agreed that non-elite participants in charity runs and other events often inspired inactive people far more than elite athletes:

I’ve met a few people that have signed up for the local marathon here because they’ve seen how a friend or colleague at work has done it and it has shown them that it is perfectly achievable for pretty much anyone

The professionals also agreed with the public that children are far more likely to be influenced by watching athletes than adults are, even if they were relatively sedentary at the time. Again, it was felt that they are more impressionable and less likely to focus on the difficulty of what is involved:

They see these wonderful athletic performances and want to do the long jump and so on and if you give them the opportunity and make sure they have a good experience then that can definitely transform into long-term participation

Festival effect

The professionals all stated they had observed positive attitudes towards the Games among members of the public and high levels of interest in the City. They also felt that the public as a whole had been keen to get involved locally and to take an active part in celebrating the event as a community rather than simply passively observing from a distance. Numerous examples were given of this occurring:

. . . look at the torch relay event we held in the park to see how much people want to be a part of these Games. We had hundreds of people come and get involved and not just from people you would expect to sign up normally like those who are already doing lots of things.

However, despite this acknowledgement of a desire to get involved in the Games, there was very little understanding among the professionals of the festival effect or how it could be harnessed to engage people in anything physically active other than sports events. Most of the non-sport based initiatives discussed were cultural or artistic in nature and had not incorporated a physical activity element.

DISCUSSION

The study has explored the views and experiences of inactive people living in an Olympic Games host country and the processes by which the event may have influenced them. By using a topic guide based on the two processes described in previous research, the study has been able to highlight a number of key themes relevant to each of these in both inactive people and professionals developing a physical activity legacy.

In interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to recognize its limitations. Despite recruiting from two sources, the sample was
small and homogeneous in terms of ethnic background and with a high level of employment. The fact that thematic saturation was achieved after only eight interviews with the public could be due to this lack of diversity among the sample. The findings may therefore not be generalizable to other settings such as black and minority ethnic groups and people of a lower socio-economic status, particularly in terms of views on community participation and involvement which may be less likely in more deprived and ethnically diverse areas. The study should therefore be regarded as exploratory in nature, providing an insight into the common themes related to the two proposed processes by which Olympic Games may influence population physical activity levels. Further research to explore the generalizability of these findings would be valuable.

In order to improve objectivity and neutrality in qualitative research, it is important to reflect on how bias may threaten the validity of the study. It is particularly important to reflect on how the interviewer was ‘placed’ by the participants. The interviewer for this study was a male aged 30 years who was employed by the National Health Service and this may have led to social desirability bias in terms of how participants expressed attitudes towards the Games, local CEs and so on. Given the fairly high rates of refusal to participate, recruitment bias may also be an issue, in that the sample may have included people with more positive attitudes and interest in the event than the average inactive adult in the general population. This is a particular concern considering that no incentives were offered for participation.

In this study, a number of steps were taken to enhance the validity of the findings. A topic guide based on a framework devised from the literature was used and interviewing continued until thematic saturation was achieved. An additional perspective on the Games and the processes involved was also obtained using four interviews with key informant professionals working in the sport and physical activity field locally. None of the key informants’ experiences conflicted substantively with the findings from members of the public. Further, many of the findings are congruent with the broader evidence base on mass sporting events. For example, the perceived lack of a ‘demonstration effect’ in these participants appears to be in line with findings of no overall increase in organized sports participation in previous host nations. Also, research in other areas such as volunteering appears to support the findings that positive attitudes towards the event can encourage people to actively engage in it.

The results provide strong support for the suggestion that the ‘demonstration effect’ mechanism for physical activity promotion is likely to be of little value in encouraging people who are or have recently been leading sedentary lifestyles to become more physically active. Participants expressed a large degree of respect for the athletes and their achievements, but none of the participants felt that this created a desire to try and copy their behaviour by participating in sports. This suggests that the recommended approach to developing a physical activity legacy in the least active people was correct to de-emphasize the elite sporting achievements of Olympic athletes and organized, competitive sports.

The results also appear to support the suggestion in previous literature (Hindson et al., 1994) that elite sports, due to the observed gap in sporting and athletic ability, could actually serve to demotivate people and reduce participation in physical activity. In this study, this demotivation appeared to be due to a decrease in self-efficacy and a focusing on negative aspects of participation. This is in line with current theory and evidence on the determinants of physical activity. Self-efficacy has been widely theorized as a facilitator of physical activity, and evidence suggests it is an important determinant of physically active behaviours (Biddle et al., 2005). Other theories of health behaviour change, such as the health belief model and the transtheoretical model, see agents as balancing the benefits and costs of different behaviours in coming to decisions (Biddle and Mutrie, 2001): participants in this study tended to concentrate more on the costs they had observed in Olympic athletes including the pain, investment of time and expensive equipment. It was acknowledged that there were also many benefits to being an elite athlete such as lifestyle and fame, but these were rarely relevant in any way to participation at a local, informal level.

Another key finding relevant to this section of the framework was that a number of subjects felt that observing both Paralympians and ordinary people engaging in mass participation events would be more likely to encourage disengaged people to try sport. A systematic review on mass participation events and population physical activity found a lack of research in this area.
(Murphy and Bauman, 2007). The qualitative research in this study suggests there may be potential to successfully use such events as a means of promoting physical activity among inactive people, and further research is required.

Finally, in terms of the demonstration effect mechanism, the strong belief that children would be inspired to participate in sports after observing Olympic athletes again suggests that the strong focus on young people taken in the UK legacy guidance was correct. This is clearly an effect that will be mediated through parents, and the observed strong belief that the Games will influence and inspire young people as well as intentions to facilitate their participation suggest this could be a genuine legacy of the Games. This will of course depend on there being easily accessible and affordable options for children to engage in.

As discussed previously, the festival effect mechanism was considered most likely to influence the least active people. In order to get inactive people involved in physically active celebratory events, it is necessary for them to hold positive attitudes towards the overall event and to have a desire to be actively involved in something that is about more than just sport. In this study, attitudes towards the Games were very favourable and people saw it as an important event in which they took both interest and pride. They felt ownership of the Games and it was clear that interest levels were far higher than when they are hosted in other countries. All of this suggests that the Games did indeed capture the interest of physically inactive people, some of who were not usually engaged or interested in sport even in a spectating capacity. There was also enthusiasm for playing an active part in the experience rather than simply watching it. Local events and initiatives that were available in the area, particularly the torch relay event in a local park, had provoked excitement and was seen as providing an excellent way for people to get involved. While this was not specifically intended to be a physical activity initiative, it had caused the community to come together in a local green space where different options for people to become physically active were promoted.

The torch relay event is a clear example of how Brighton & Hove succeeded in using the Games to engage people in the community who are not usually involved in physically active lifestyles and exposed them to a positive physical activity experience. Returning to the theories of behaviour change, this could potentially focus people on the ‘pros’ of the behaviour that are realistic and relevant to them (feelings of enjoyment, development of social relationships, being in pleasant surroundings and so on). As stated previously, the transtheoretical model demonstrates how this can help people to move through the stages of change, potentially leading to sustained participation (Biddle and Mutrie, 2001). One example of this found in this study was the participant who stated a clear intent to use local green spaces with their family more following the event in a local park. This suggests that it is possible to use the celebratory atmosphere of an Olympic Games initially to involve and engage inactive people, before providing opportunities for such people to move through the behaviour change stages towards becoming more physically active.

Overall, the lack of efficacy of a demonstration effect of viewing elite athletes competing as a means of promoting participation appears to have been supported by the findings of this study. However, evidence was found of positive attitudes and enthusiasm for the Olympic Games among inactive and recently inactive people in Brighton & Hove. There was some suggestion that the Games are seen as something for everyone to participate in together rather than just an elite sporting competition to watch passively and examples of the development of intention to engage in physical activity in the future as a result of participating in a physically active celebratory events were observed. However, despite these examples and the positive experiences of the torch relay event, it is important to note that there were few other clear examples given of how people were taking an active part in the Games and there were few other clear intentions to increase physical activity. This would suggest that while it is possible to impact on this group of people and this may have been achieved to some extent in Brighton, the overall impact is likely to have been minimal. Nevertheless, increasing physical activity among disengaged, inactive people has traditionally been very hard to do, and even a small impact could provide considerable public health benefits.

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