

## **BUYING, HAVING AND BEING': AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF TEENAGERS' CONSUMPTION OF SPORTING GOODS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is part of a larger study about the underlying meanings and usage of sporting goods. Sporting goods are an integral part of the sport culture as they reflect values and social networks (Ohl & Taks, 2007). Sporting goods are multi-functional. They can be used or purchased to participate in sport, to watch sport, or just have a utility or symbolic meaning, with no sporting goal at all. The first part of the larger study focussed on the international comparison of the consumption of sporting goods among a homogeneous group of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year kinesiology students in four countries, i.e. Belgium, Germany, France and Canada. Overall, very few cultural differences appeared in the consumption of sporting goods as far as the country of origin was concerned. This emphasized the global demeanour of the sporting good industry. The taste for sporting goods was more embedded in social expressions such as friendship, conversation or biography, rather than depending on classical sociological variables such as parental social status. The current study focuses on the consumption of sporting goods among teenagers. The purchasing power of teenagers does not go unnoticed by marketers and retailers of clothing, sporting goods, fast food, electronic equipment, and entertainment. Canadian teenagers, for example, earn more than \$ 4 billion, and spend about \$ 6 billion annually (Brearton, 2000). Purchases and activities of teenagers often reflect a desire to 'fit in' or to identify with a certain group of individuals, also referred to as subcultures. Subcultures share the same beliefs, common experiences, a unique set of norms, vocabulary, and product insignias (Solomon et al., 2005). Sporting goods have become an important part of teenagers' 'state of being'. They provide a unique opportunity to express themselves, and create subcultures. In line with the previous study, consumption is considered to be a complex activity with various sociological dimensions. The purpose of this contribution is to understand how teenagers use sporting goods, attribute meanings to them in everyday life, to what extent they like or dislike them, and whether international differences are apparent within the teen segment.

### **METHODS**

The Canadian response group consisted of 238 teenagers (high school students; grade 9 to 12; ages 14-18) from four different schools; 59% were females and 41% were males. The Flemish response group consisted of 920 teenagers from four different high schools (age 14-18); 63 % were females and 37% were males. The questionnaire used in the preliminary survey with kinesiology students was tested in a pilot survey, and adapted for the teenage population. It consisted of three major sections: (a) a section on sport participation; (b), a section on sporting goods and material culture; and, (c) a section about their social background (27 questions, and 81 variables in total). Content validity (Gable & Ohl, 2002), and inter- and intra-tester reliability of the coding (Taks, 2002) were found to be adequate. A similar questionnaire in English and Dutch was used to collect the data. Frequencies, chi-square analyses, means and t-test are used to describe differences and similarities between the Belgian and Canadian teenagers.

## **RESULTS**

### **The sports profile of the respondents**

Canadian teenagers show a clear preference for team sports. Soccer is the number one preferred sport of Canadian girls (16%), ice hockey is typically preferred among Canadian boys (15%). Basketball is equally popular among Canadian boys and girls (17% and 16% respectively). In the Belgian sample, soccer is the number one sport for boys (24%), while dance and ballet are the preferred sporting activities of the girls (18%). There are no team sports in the top-five preferred sport for the Belgian girls. Only two team sports, i.e. soccer and basketball, are in the top-five list of Belgian boys. Biking, jogging and tennis are equally popular among Belgian boys and girls, and can be considered 'gender neutral'. Swimming appeared in the top-five preferred sport for both Canadian and Belgian girls (8% and 9% respectively). With regard to intensity, i.e. the average number of hours of sport participation per week, the low activity level of the Belgian girls stands out with 64 % being in the lowest category (0-5hrs/week), compared to 35% of the Canadian girls, 34% of the Belgian boys, and only 25% of the Canadian boys. Similarly, 63% of the Belgian girls participate in sport at a non-competitive level, compared to 38% of the Canadian girls. About 75% of the Canadian and Belgian boys are active in competitions.

### **The meaning and usage of sporting goods**

The boys in the sample possess about 20 sport items on average (including apparel, shoes and equipment), while the girls have about 15 items. Canadian boys and girls spend 700 € and 450 € on sporting goods respectively, which is less than their Belgian counterparts (829 € and 621 € respectively). Belgian teenagers may have a more 'exclusive taste', or sporting goods are more expensive in Europe. Note that in both countries, boys spend more money on sporting goods than girls. This may be in line with their higher level of sport involvement as noted above. In addition, boys in both samples had stronger positive attitudes towards sports items (e.g., like wearing sport apparel, using sport equipment, keeping track of new trends, ...). Computers, audio-equipment, TV's and VCR's are preferred goods by teenagers on both continents. Sport equipment and apparel are at the bottom of preferred goods for Canadian and Belgian girls, while they rank 4<sup>th</sup> and 7/8<sup>th</sup> as preferred goods among the Canadian and Belgian boys. Finally, Canadian boys and girls wear sport apparel (clothes and shoes) more frequently in settings outside sport activities (e.g., at school, shopping, movies, concert, restaurant) compared to their Belgian counterparts. On all occasions boys outdo girls in wearing sports apparel.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results indicate that sport participation and sporting goods are more strongly embedded in the life of Canadian teenagers compared to Belgian teenagers. Regardless of their country of origin, the meaning and usage of sporting goods is more prominent in the lives of teenage boys than for teenage girls. This finding goes hand in hand with the higher level of involvement and affinity with sport among boys. More in-depth analyses will be carried out to identify relationships between the meaning and usage of sporting goods and other socio-cultural background characteristics, such as the parental educational level, the parental sports involvement and sports interests. This research provides insight in the material dimension of sport culture as it relates to generation Y, a target market that only a few studies have recently started to examine from a sport consumer perspective (Bennet et al., 2003; Bradish et al., 2001; Greenwald & Fernandez-Balboa, 1998; Lim & Turco, 1999).

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