

Consuming indoor climbing: Principal results of a customer satisfaction study in a private artificial climbing centre in France

Authors: Éric Boutroy & Stéphane Champely

Institution: Centre for Research and Innovation in Sport (CRIS), Lyon 1 University, France.

E-mail: eric.boutroy@univ-lyon1.fr

Abstract keywords: Customer satisfaction study, Expectations, Indoor Climbing, Sociodemography

Aims

In the last decades, one of the main changes in the mass participation sports activities is the growth of indoor sports, especially due to a phenomenon of “indoorisation of outdoor sports” (Salome, 2010). The first and most important case of this artificialisation trend is the development of urban climbing walls, all-over the world and especially in France. Since the 1980s, indoor climbing has become a very popular activity and the number of artificial centres has considerably increased. A recent review counted more than 2 000 artificial climbing walls in France (Mao & Bourdeau, 2008). Most of them are public centres subsidized by local communities and managed by clubs and associations but private climbing centres have been recently expanding. Surprisingly, contrasting with the knowledge on other indoor activities such as fitness, there is no scientific study about who are indoor climbers, and what are they indeed doing. In this context, we have been commissioned by the management of the biggest French indoor climbing centre to conduct a sociological and marketing customer study. Based on the results of this survey, the purpose of this presentation is double. On the one hand, the description of this audience and this particular market will question certain consequences of the “indoorisation” of climbing. On the other hand, through the report of the methodology used, it will be possible to show the fruitful contributions of a socio-cultural approach for studying marketing problems.

Theoretical background

If the climbing population is hard to identify in general survey on sport activities (INSEP/MEOS 2010, MJS/INSEP 2000), some particular sociological studies analysed the motivations of climbers and the social composition of this group in specific field (licence-holders of sports federations, users of notorious sites: Fontainebleau, Chamonix...) In the continuity of Pociello (1995), they observed the link between social variables, social logics and style of practices and emphasized some traditional division of the social space of sports, showing that outdoor associative climbing appears as a relative elective activity (Corneloup, 2004; Lefèvre, 2004). Do the “indoorisation” and the commercialisation of climbing change the motivations and appreciation of this sport or the social aspects of this group?

Methodology and data analysis

This research is based on a socio-cultural approach focused on sociodemographic characteristics, sporting objectives of climbers, forms of their sporting practices, expectations and satisfaction on 25 attributes (primary and secondary services, service quality, atmosphere) in the observed indoor climbing centre. It is carried out mainly by questionnaires (n=921) but also by direct and participant observations, and by semi-structured interviews (n=15). The fieldwork began in September 2011 and the questionnaire has been completed in November 2011, using a census method during a complete week.

Classical descriptive univariate statistics and tabular analyses were used to describe the sociodemographic features of this sample. Furthermore, we propose here an innovative graphical display – called plotciello (based on Pociello’s use of the concepts of cultural and economic capital) – that could be used to depict the influence of occupation on other variables (expectations, forms of practice). Finally, an underestimated multivariate technique, co-inertia analysis, allowed to study the relationship between sporting objectives and customer expectations.

Results

Despite a hypothesis that “indoorisation” could open the choices of actors, the results show that indoor climbing remains significantly influenced by social determination and still represents a distinctive practice: over-representation of men (66%, increasing with intensity of practice), of upper classes and much more of high educational level (55% of the active climbers have at least a Master degree)... If the majority of indoor climbers have indeed small or middle level of practice, we will measure and describe stylisation effect with the help of customer profiles related to those traditionally observed in outdoor climbing: the novice-tourist, the hedonistic, the mountaineer and the performer-competitive. We will then expose how these characteristics are related to specific expectations about indoor climbing. It will be suggested that the commercialisation of climbing doesn’t mean a revolution in motivations still focused on a hard-core sportive demand (ex: quality, variety and renewal of the routes). To conclude, we will underline the practical applications of these pieces of information for the survey sponsor (ex: refocusing on the ordinary indoor climbers or the core expectations).

References

- Corneloup, J. (2004). L’enquête d’opinion dans l’étude des pratiques sportives de montagne. *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 83, 18-42
- Lefèvre, B. (2004). Contribution à l’étude de la structuration sociale des pratiques de haute montagne: l’exemple des usagers dans le massif du Mont-Blanc. *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, 92 (4), 67-85
- Mao P., Bourdeau P. (2008). Les lieux de pratique des sports de nature en France : une géographie différenciée. *Mappemonde*, 89 (1), <http://mappemonde.mgm.fr/num17/articles/art08101.html>
- Pociello, C. (1995). *Les cultures sportives*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France
- Salome, L. (2010). Constructing authenticity in contemporary consumer culture: the case of lifestyle sports. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 7 (1), 69-87