

The consumption of sporting goods: a comparison between Belgian and Canadian students

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Introduction

Researchers exploring sport culture focus on its participant and spectator dimensions more so than on its material dimension, which Dant (1999) refers to as material culture. However, sporting goods are an essential part of the sport culture (Ohl, 2001; Penaloza, 1998; Lamont & Molnar, 2001; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). As such, it is important to focus on the material dimension of sport culture, from both sociological and marketing perspectives. Moreover, as sporting goods have become global products, an international perspective of the consumption sporting goods is appropriate.

The purpose of this survey is to identify the role of material culture, i.e. the consumption, the usage, and the social meaning(s) of sporting goods in people's sports and daily lives. This paper is a first exploration of an international comparative study in which Belgian and Canadian students are used as samples. The scope and level of analysis in this international comparison is limited to 1st and 2nd year Kinesiology students. Despite many differences linked to each national situation, these students are nonetheless in similar circumstances, allowing for control of variables such as age, educational level and interest in the field of sport and kinesiology.

Method

The sample consisted of 160 kinesiology students from a Canadian University in Southern Ontario (response rate 71%), and of 237 kinesiology students from a Belgian (Flemish) University (response rate 63.7%). A similar questionnaire, with an English version and a Flemish version, was used to collect the data. The questionnaire included three major parts, i.e. a section on: (a) sport participation; (b) sporting goods and material culture; and, (c) demographic characteristics. In total 27 questions were used to tap 81 variables. Content validity (Gable & Ohl, 2002) and inter- and intra-tester reliability of the coding (Taks, 2002) were established and found to be acceptable. Frequencies, chi-square analyses, means and t-test are used to describe differences and similarities between the Belgian and Canadian students.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The Canadian students were somewhat older than the Belgian students (mean age 21 and 20 respectively). In both groups, there were slightly more females (52% in the Canadian sample and 56% in the Belgian sample). Canadian students seemed more affluent. A higher proportion came from families with higher income levels (chi-square = 17.136, df = 2, $p < .01$). The fathers of the Canadian students were more physically active compared to the fathers from the Belgian sample ($p < .05$), while there was no significant difference in the activity levels of the Canadian and the Belgian mothers. Flemish parents watched less sports on TV compared to their Canadian counterparts ($p < .001$).

The sports profile of the respondents.

Cultural differences in sports preferences were readily apparent (table 1). The Canadian students preferred basketball, fitness and hockey (for the males), and fitness, soccer and volleyball (for the females). The Belgian male students showed an ultimate preference for soccer, while the females ranked volleyball, jogging and tennis as the most preferred sports. In both samples, the males showed a higher level of intensity, i.e. spending more hours per week on sports and physical activity compared to their female counterparts. However, there was a significant difference between the Canadian and the Belgian sample in the hours of sports spent per week in favour of the Canadian students spending more time on sport (chi-square 122.506, df = 4, $p < .001$). This was true for both sexes. Seventy percent of the students in both samples have participated in sports at a competitive level at some point in their lives. These results partially support the expectation of homogeneity for both samples with regard to the level of sport involvement, which is expected to affect the usage and consumption of sporting goods.

The meaning and usage of sporting goods.

Although the Canadian students indicated they possessed more sports items (32 on average compared to 21 in the Belgian sample, $p < .05$), there was no significant difference in the expenditures on sporting goods (mean = 1,287 Euro/yr for the Canadian students, and 1,266 Euro/yr for the Belgian students)(table 2). This poses the question as to whether sporting goods are less expensive in North America, or whether Belgian students have more expensive tastes? All students in the sample, Canadian and Belgian, males and females, equally liked wearing sporting goods, using sport equipment, and shopping for sporting good items (table 3). However, the Canadian males and females indicated to be more brand and trend sensitive with regard to sporting goods. When the usage and importance of sporting goods was compared to other goods, the Canadian students indicated to be more attached to household appliances, computers, TV/video/DVD and cars, compared to their Belgian counterparts (table 4). Belgian students were more attached to decoration, houses and sports apparel. No significant differences appeared for the attachment on sport equipment (both groups strongly attached), audio equipment (strongly attached), and books (less attached). Finally, subjects were asked about the wearing of sports shoes and apparel outside active sports participation (table 5). Belgian students wore sport shoes and apparel significantly more often at university. This might be due to the fact that they have more sports opportunities in their curriculum compared to their Canadian counterparts. Therefore, there is a higher need to wear sporting goods during college hours. The Canadian students tend to wear sporting goods significantly more often in their daily activities (doing shopping, going to the movies, to a bar, or a restaurant). There definitely is room for sporting good manufacturers to tap into the Belgian market to reinforce the wearing of casual sports clothes for non-sporting purposes. Overall, the 'utility' aspect of sporting goods seemed more important for the Belgian students, while 'fashion' seemed more important for the Canadian students.

Discussion

This research contributes to the body of knowledge of both, sport sociology and sport marketing in an international perspective. The results provide an insight into the material dimension of sport culture, a neglected research area to date. It focused on a homogeneous group of Kinesiology students, in order to be able to control for as many variables as possible. Further research should include broader samples, such as seniors, the general population, or teenagers in particular. The latter are considered a niche market, which few studies have examined from a sports consumer perspective (Bradish et. al., 2001). Finally, the results allow sporting good marketers and retailers to implement and/or alter their strategies to tap new markets, in order to better meet the wants and the needs of the sport consumer.

References

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Table 1: Most preferred sports of the respondents (in percentage)

Canada		Belgium					
Males (n = 76)	Females (n = 83)	Males (n = 103)	Females (n = 133)				
Basketball	47	Fitness	36	Soccer	49	Volleyball	24
Fitness	42	Volleyball	36	Jogging	24	Jogging	23
Hockey	42	Soccer	33	Cycling	17	Tennis	21
Baseball	26	Jogging	33	Swimming	15	Swimming	18
Am. Football	25	Basketball	28	Tennis	14	Dance	16

Table 2: Possession of, and expenditure on sporting goods by respondents

	Canada Mean(std)	Belgium Mean(std)	T-test	p
# of sporting good items	32(48)	21(17)	2.59	**
Mean expenses (Euro/yr)	1287(1362)	1266(1731)	0.12	NS

Table 3: Attitude towards sport items (means based on a 7 point scale from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree)

	Canada Mean(std)	Belgium Mean(std)	T-test	p
I like wearing sport apparel	5.80(1.29)	6.08(1.22)	-2.10*	
I like using sport equipment	6.17(1.02)	5.84(1.19)	2.92*	
Brand attention	5.21(1.42)	3.65(1.58)	10.17***	
I keep track of new trends	4.43(1.57)	3.36(1.55)	6.70***	
I am consulted by others	3.76(1.71)	3.09(1.49)	4.00***	
I enjoy going to a sports shop	5.46(1.51)	5.50(1.49)	-0.21ns	

Table 4: Relative importance of having and/or acquiring material goods (means based on a 4 point scale from 1 = not attached to 4 = strongly attached)

	Canada Mean(std)	Belgium Mean(std)	T-test	p
Household appliances	2.42(0.96)	1.92(0.82)	5.12***	
Decoration (posters, frames, ...)	2.45(1.03)	2.89(0.83)	-4.22***	
Audio equipment	3.16(0.92)	3.10(0.80)	0.54ns	
Books	2.42(0.95)	2.25(0.93)	1.77ns	
Sport Equipment	3.38(0.80)	3.40(0.72)	-0.29ns	
Real Estate	2.13(1.05)	2.40(0.84)	-2.55*	
Computer	3.26(0.87)	2.65(1.03)	6.27***	
Sport Apparel	2.99(0.9)	3.36(0.67)	-4.29***	
TV/Video/DVD	3.03(0.91)	2.49(0.95)	5.53***	
Car	3.32(0.99)	2.49(1.07)	7.63***	

Table 5: Wearing of sport apparel (shoes and clothes) outside active sports participation (means based on a 5 point scale, from 1 = never to 5 = most of the time)

	Canada Mean(std)	Belgium Mean(std)	T-test p
Sport shoes at university	3.84(1.05)	3.89(1.05)	-0.46ns
Sport clothes at university	3.45(0.98)	3.87(1.01)	-4.09***
Sport shoes shopping	3.55(1.15)	2.41(1.15)	9.68***
Sport clothes shopping	3.20(1.08)	2.35(1.09)	7.61***
Sport shoes at the movies	3.01(1.29)	1.72(1.03)	10.57***
Sport clothes at the movies	2.66(1.15)	1.62(0.89)	9.62***
Sport shoes in a bar	1.87(1.18)	1.65(0.94)	2.02*
Sport clothes in a bar	1.62(0.90)	1.56(0.84)	0.63ns
Sport shoes restaurant	2.69(1.26)	1.42(0.75)	11.39***
Sport clothes restaurant	2.42(1.07)	1.38(0.68)	10.87***

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