

Examining what Drives Urban Canadian Youth to Actively Participate in Sport

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Keywords: Sport participation, Youth, Canada, Urban, Qualitative study

Abstract

Research Question

Active engagement in sport is known to be important to Canadians in terms of economics, health, and identity. Yet, statistics point to an alarming rise in obesity levels, significant declines in participation rates, and the call for "collaboration" between governments, non-profits and businesses to enhance participation. A challenging paradox results: while health and fitness dominate our agenda, the population as a whole is becoming less healthy, less fit and less active. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to compare youth's reasons for participating in football, pool and rink sports in order to assist in formulating strategies and policies to promote an active lifestyle and its individual and societal benefits.

Theoretical Background

The literature offers some key drivers to use as a starting point. Previous research demonstrates that participation decreases with age (Merrifield, 2007). Also, female participants tend to participate less frequently than male participants on a consistent basis (e.g., Flintoff, 2005). From a geographical standpoint, recent studies show that there are significant regional differences in youth participation levels (Loucades, Plotnikoff, & Bercovitz, 2007). Also, ethnicity seems to have an impact on the type of sport practiced (Elling & Knoppers, 2005). Socioeconomic status has a direct impact on youth participation in sport. Generally, highly educated parents with high income salaries and two-parent households are positively correlated to youth sport participation (Bloom, Grant & Watt, 2005, Vander Kloet, O'Reilly, & Berger, 2007). Family involvement in sport has a strong causal link in youth participation in sport (e.g. Kay, 2005).

Methodology

We focused on three types of sport (football, pool and rink sports) and on both individual- and team-based participation. Interviews (Weiss, 1994) were conducted with 15 youth aged 12-19, including 9 male and 6 female participants. The interviews

lasted, on average, 30 minutes. The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti 5.2 was used to assist in intra- and inter-sport content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to determine (1) what makes youth want to participate in sport (i.e. drivers), (2) how do youth participate in sport (i.e. processes), and (3) to what degree do youth participate in sport (i.e. strength of engagement).

Results / Discussion / Implications

Findings highlight 8 key drivers of active participation in sport by youth: family (initiative, involvement, rules, sports practiced, support), socioeconomic status (family income and structure), location (accessibility, home-town population), personal attributes (identity aspect) and skills (perception of strengths vs. weaknesses), friends, school and coach's influence. By far, family was the strongest, most highly cited dimension. Processes of youth sport participation depended on the interaction with youth's social surroundings. The strength of youth engagement in sport was influenced by the level of competition and degree of family involvement. Results therefore support but also differ from the literature presented above (e.g., personal attributes/skills significantly impacting the type of sport practiced, especially for competitive levels of participation). Interestingly, the school had a dual nature with respect to sport participation, acting both as a facilitator and barrier. Implications for sport organization managers, policy makers, marketers and researchers are presented based on these results.

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