

Understanding the sport participation engagement process: Towards a multi-dimensional perspective

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Aim of paper and research questions

As Canadian society continues to struggle with the related issues of sedentary lifestyles, obesity and declining sport participation rates, a call for the collective effort of governments, corporate Canada, and researchers has provided the impetus for examining strategies and policies to promote a viable and practical solution. As part of this call to action, efforts have been made to more closely examine the engagement of urban Canadian youth in sport. More specifically, research has sought to investigate those key factors and influencers which drive active engagement in sport for Canadian youth. This paper further examines the sport participation engagement process, the consequence of which demonstrates the need to widen the theoretical lens.

Literature review

Going back to the previous work in this area provides a base understanding of the factors which seemingly drive participation in sport. Age (Merrifield, 2007), gender (Bradley, McMurray, Harrell & Deng, 2000), geographical context (Loucaudes, Plotnikoff & Bercovitz, 2007), ethnicity/race (Elling & Knoppers, 2005), socio-economic status (Bloom, Grant & Watt, 2005), and family (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003) are recognised in the literature as influencing participation in sport. With this as a starting point, the initial phase of research in this study expanded upon these areas and found there to be eight specific key drivers of participation: parental influence, sibling influence, socio-economic status, geographic context, personal attributes, friends, school and coaches (Parent, Nehme, Seguin & O'Reilly, 2008). These drivers have then been argued to interact with identity, social or institutional based integration processes to impact upon the athlete's strength of engagement (Parent et al., 2008).

Research design and data analysis

Building on earlier research, this phase of the study conducted semi-structured interviews in Canada's two largest cities with male and female athletes aged 12 to 19, and involved in football, pool or rink sports. In total 34 interviews were conducted, with a total of 18 boys and 16 girls from various levels of competition (recreational level up to national team level). The interviews, lasting 25-40 minutes, were completed in both French and English, either in person or over the phone. Each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researchers. Data were analysed using content analysis and coded using the eight drivers set out by Parent et al. (2008) as initial themes. Emerging themes were also noted.

Results

Results of this study demonstrate three major findings. The first confirmed and expanded upon the findings of Parent et al. (2008). While the original eight drivers are all evident in the data, an additional four (culture, facilities, role models and spectatorship) were also found

to be of importance. Secondly, the data indicates that while school, coaches and friends are positive drivers of participation, in certain instances, they can also be viewed as barriers, thus creating an interesting paradox. Finally, the need to examine sport participation drivers and the engagement process from a multi-dimensional/theoretical perspective, at various levels was evident. The original research approached the engagement process from a consumer behaviour standpoint; but the emerging complex nature of the process suggests that a wider lens must be used taking the social, institutional or identity based levels into deeper consideration within each perspective.

Discussion and conclusion

The results have shown a multifaceted view of the sport participation engagement process is warranted in order to truly understand how it can be impacted upon through the called-for policies and strategies by governments and other agencies. Each of the three findings discussed above provide a way forward in this research. Data suggest it is not one, but a multitude of factors which impact upon engagement processes creating a 'clutter' of factors that coalesce in various forms to drive deeper, more active sport participation. How these factors interact and combine merits deeper examination. Similarly, the discovery of factors which act as both barriers and facilitators create tensions which ought to be examined. Further survey research will seek to discover not just what drives participation but when (what age, level of competition, etc.) and how such barriers lead to youth leaving sport. Finally, the overall theoretical framework with which this research has been viewed should be refined. The complex nature of the noted drivers of participation, as well as the three broader levels of engagement (social, institutional and identity-based), necessitate using various approaches to best define and describe the reasons behind engagement. By taking not just a consumer behaviour approach, but also organisational behaviour, management, and psychological perspectives, this paper provides a deeper and more comprehensive understanding.

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