
CONCEPTUALIZING SPORT PARTICIPATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

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BACKGROUND

Authors suggest that sport faces growing environmental, ethical, financial, and social challenges (e.g., Babiak, 2007). One area that is a current challenge for sport managers and researchers is the decline in sport participation in many regions of the world. Sport participation has been the focus of a considerable amount of research, policy development, and programs in a variety of sport settings. There is a significant body of research that theorizes and empirically examines the determinants, outcomes, and typologies of sport participation, and the causes of non-participation in a variety of populations.

Cousens, Barnes, and MacLean (2012), amongst other authors, suggest that partnerships may be one way to address the challenges facing the sport industry, and that partnerships are an increasing component of the sport landscape. Research interest in partnerships in many academic domains has continued to develop since the 1990s (Van Huijstee, Francken, & Leroy, 2007). This growth in the academy is associated with a rise in studies looking at partnerships in the sport context. These studies have taken a variety of approaches, and have been informed from theories and evidence from other disciplines. For instance, Babiak (2007) took findings from the business management academy and used a case study to test the theories in the sport context to provide insightful contributions to explain the motives of sport organizations entering into interorganizational relationships.

Recently, the sport management literature has addressed the specific issue of sport participation and partnerships (e.g., Cousens et al. , 2012; MacLean, Cousens, & Barnes, 2011). These studies have focused on a variety of areas of partnerships, including the community sport setting, and the impact that partnerships can have in stimulating sport participation. Although there is not a

large body of literature specifically investigating sport participation and partnerships, early findings suggest that sport organizations may foster sport participation through partnerships.

This paper approaches sport participation and partnerships from a conceptual viewpoint to explore previous literature, theories, and provide areas of future research to provide a better understanding of the concept of sport participation and partnerships in the sport management academic domain. The paper uses key findings from other fields of research (e.g., Van Huijstee et al., 2007) to inform areas that are fertile for future research.

METHODS

Sport management journals (e.g., European Sports Management Quarterly, Journal of Sport Management) were searched for peer-reviewed, published articles that focused on sport participation and/or partnerships. Key findings in academic articles from associated disciplines' journals (e.g., business management, the nonprofit sector) were also collected.

IMPLICATIONS

Sport organizations can use partnerships as multi-purpose tools to meet sport participation demands (e.g., Cousens et al., 2012). To meet the demand of current sport participants for higher quality programs (MacLean et al., 2011), partnerships offer access to tangible and intangible resources and information to continue meeting the needs and wants of this target group. To attract new sport participants, partnerships between sport organizations and other stakeholders allow for strengthened relationships to develop new, collaborative approaches to increase sport participation (e.g., Cousens et al., 2012).

In the sport context, partnerships exist between and within three sectors (public, private, and nonprofit), and occur at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Organizations in each of the sectors take on different roles and responsibilities within the interorganizational relationship. The partnerships aimed at increasing sport participation can occur between same-sport organizations (e.g., MacLean et al., 2012), within the same community, or can involve multi-sport relationships. There is limited research about the mechanisms and motivations of same-sport interorganizational relationships, but these collaborations may stimulate sport participation for specific sports.

As there is an emphasis on finding solutions to the decreasing sport participation experienced in many countries (e.g., Cousens et al., 2012), and the increased research in the area of partnerships, this paper presents the role partnerships can have in maintaining participation in populations that currently participate and to increase in non-participating populations. This paper advances our knowledge by reviewing literature, and adding to the agenda for future research in this domain.

As researchers suggest that sport managers must be skillful in partnerships (e.g., Babiak, 2007), this paper concludes by promoting the suggestion that partnership(s) between the sport management academy and sport organizations are increasingly required. This can provide practical learning opportunities for future sport managers (i.e., students), and allow sport

management researchers to foster increased understanding about partnerships and sport participation.

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