

A Socio-Demographic Analysis of French Ice Hockey Participants: which Opportunities for the Development of the Sport?

Routier, Guillaume; Gaudefroy, Alan and Bodet, Guillaume
Univ Lyon, University Claude Bernard Lyon-1, L-VIS, France
guillaume.bodet@univ-lyon1.fr

In contrast with other team sports ice hockey remains a relatively confidential sport with low participation rates in France. The national governing-body, the French ice hockey Federation (FFHG), is still young (founded in 2006) and gathered only 20 653 members in 2015. This figure is quite low in comparison with football (2 135 193 members) and basketball (577 372 members) for instance and positions the FFHG at the penultimate position in the participation ranking of the single-sport Olympic French governing-bodies; 0.2% of overall members. Nevertheless, French ice hockey has shown promising signs of development that are translated into a regular increase of its members (+1.4% between 2014-15 and +20% from 2006). The year 2017, was also marked by the inauguration of its national centre and the co-hosting of the 2017 IIHF Men World Championship with Germany, and the year 2018 saw the promotion of the Women team to the top elite level. Although the signs are encouraging, many issues and obstacles remain for the sport to join the top professional team sports in France (Bodet, 2017).

Theoretical Background

The FFHG's offers are articulated around providing competitive participation, following a traditional organisation format, and leisure participation, but that remains minor and under-developed. As observed by Hautbois (2014), the market of federal sports has reached a maturation stage that is characterised by an increasing competitive intensity. Consequently, a deep strategic reflexion should be engaged for most federations to keep on attracting more members while keeping the current ones loyal. In other words, it becomes crucial to adopt a marketing orientation that should be better driven by current members and potential targeted members' needs (Bodet, 2010). For Tribou *et al.* (2015) mention two options that are not exclusive from each other: 1) targeting new segments that are currently distant from the sport; Hautbois (2014) specifically mentions new age segments, women and/or new geographical areas, and 2) developing new formats of the sports. In both situations, such approach oriented towards the demand requires a very strong and deep knowledge of current and potential participants' profiles, motives and perceived constraints, to elaborate a clear and rational strategic marketing plan and adjust federal and clubs' offers (Bodet, 2010).

Method

With the help of the FFHG, a questionnaire was developed and sent to all members registered on the FFHG newsletter (n=16 975). The questionnaire comprised questions dealing with the socio-demographic profile of participants (age, gender, education levels, etc.), open-ended questions to describe their sport, motives for sport participation, perceived constraints for participation. A total of 1 156 usable questionnaires constitutes the study sample. Data were analysed with the use of R software. Descriptive statistics and pairwise tests were conducted. In parallel, 7 semi-structured interviews were conducted with FFHG elected members and managers to their overall perceptions of the development constraints and opportunities of the sport.

Findings

The study first allowed to draw a clear picture of participants' profiles: a young (median age: 27 years old) man, from higher socio-economic categories with a relatively high economic and cultural capital. We can observe that passion is the most used term to describe their sport participation, followed by pleasure, speed and competition. This passionate involvement tends to be correlated with a significant personal and financial involvement. In the same vein, one of the most cited expectations are conviviality spirit and family atmosphere. Unsurprisingly, competition remains a core element of their participation. These passionate participants represent a loyal group. On the opposite, a minor group expresses motivations towards a need to participate in sport to exert oneself. The participants from this group are more difficult to keep loyal which could explain the quite low orientation of organisations towards their needs and intrinsic characteristics, such as their search for variety (Bodet, 2009). Overall these results allow clustering members into four segments that are defined in relation to the competitive dimension: children, competitors, former competitors and recreation-oriented participants. On the opposite, segments appear underrepresented; women, older participants, students and young adults and individuals from lower socio-economic background.

Conclusion

This data-based portrayal of ice hockey members in France represents the first step for the FFHG to engage a strategic marketing reflexion to identify whether these members fit with the perceptions of the elected members and managers and should help them refining their targeting and positioning. From a theoretical point view, these results confirm that ice hockey members in France mainly come from higher social and economic categories, that should clearly be taken into consideration when developing its image and/or trying to develop it, particularly extending to other population segments.

References

- Bodet, G. (2017), Constraints and opportunities for establishing ice hockey as a major professional sport in France, in Altukhov, S. and Nauright, J. (ed.), *Strategies of ice hockey development in the global world*, World Hockey Forum: Moscow.
- Bodet, G. (2010), Managing Marketing, in Robinson L. & Palmer D. (Eds.), *Managing Voluntary Sport Organisations*, Routledge: London, 156-176.
- Bodet, G. (2009). Sport participation and consumption and post-modern society: From Apollo to Dionysus? *Loisir et Société/Society and Leisure*, 32(2), 223-241.
- Hautbois, C. (2014). *Le marketing des fédérations sportives*, Paris : Economica.
- R Core Team (2016). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing.
- Tribou, G., Dermit, N., & Wojak, C. (Éds). (2015). *Management du sport. Marketing et gestion des clubs sportifs* (4ème édition). Paris, France: Dunod.