

Factors Affecting Alpine Skiing Participation in China prior to the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games

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Aim

Winning the bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games (OG) in Beijing is a catalyst to develop China's winter sport industry, including alpine skiing (referred to as "skiing" here after). Skiing participation in China has increased from 4.7 million participants in 2007 to 15 million in 2016 (average frequency of 1.3; Su et al., 2017). Targeted marketing campaigns, based on an in-depth knowledge of the consumer behavior of various segments, allow to capitalize on this momentum of growth. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify factors that affect skiing participation among different types of ski consumer groups in China.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Participation in skiing can grow by stimulating non-participants to pick up the sport, and/or current participants to ski more (i.e., increase involvement). Based on product usages segmentation, non-participants can be further segmented into non-skiers (i.e., never skied before) and former-skiers (i.e., participated in the past); while skiers can be segmented into light, medium and heavy users (Mulin et al., 2014; Williams & Basford, 1992). Shank and Lyberger (2015) sport's consumer model offers a framework to identify constraining and facilitating factors for various market segments. The model consist of internal or psychological factors (e.g., perceptions, motivations); (2) external or sociocultural factors, (e.g., culture, reference groups, social class); and (3) situational factors (e.g. physical and social surroundings, task definition, time and antecedent states) that affect the decision-making process.

Method

An online survey was sent randomly through a data collection internet platform in Beijing (China). A total of 622 questionnaires were returned. Of the 622, 23% were non-skiers, 6% were former skiers, 40% were low-frequency skiers (less or equal to 5 times per season), 20% were moderate-frequency skiers (6 to 10 times per season), and 12% were high-frequency skiers (11 times or more per season). The survey included 11 internal, 3 external, and 9 situational items. Items were measured as dummy variables (0=no and 1=yes) or on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not all important/satisfied to 5= very important/satisfied). Descriptive statistics and significant differences between the five ski-consumer groups were calculated using Chi-square tests and ANOVAS.

Results

Non- and former skiers were strongly constrained by *internal factors*, such as perceiving skiing being too dangerous (54%) and too expensive (33%), as well as perceptions of a lack of skill (55%). These constraining factors diminished significantly with an increased level of involvement. On the positive side, 42% of the non-skiers expressed an interest in learning how to ski. Making new friends was a high motivating factor for the high-frequency skiers (47%). In the context of *external factors*, non-skiers expressed a reluctance to skiing alone (only 16% would ski alone). In contrast, skiers preferred skiing alone, increasing from low- to high-frequency skiers. For all five consumer groups, a lack of time, the state of rental ski

equipment, and the design and quality of ski resorts were equally important constraining *situational factors*. Although non-skiers have never skied before, they anticipated that transportation to ski resorts (41%), and ski equipment maintenance (49%) would be problematic, and not meet their satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

Constraining and facilitating elements from all three factors of Shank and Lyberger's (2015) model were apparent for all five ski-consumer groups, but with various levels of importance. The constraining factors for non-skiers, former skiers and the low-frequency skiers are consistent with previous findings (Gilbert & Hudson, 2000). Similar results for external factors were found by Alexandris and colleagues (2006). Non-skiers need to be guided into skiing by an experienced person (friends or ski instructors) who can make them familiar with ski resorts and enable them to feel that skiing is fun and exciting (Williams & Fidgeon, 2000). Based on our findings, sport marketing strategies for increasing skiing participation in China must: (1) emphasize safety features to overcome perceptions of danger, rather than images of steep mountains and competitive physical activity for all segment group (Williams & Fidgeon, 2000), (2) promote ski lessons to help develop skills, (3) keep the cost of skiing within a reasonable range, and (4) guarantee well maintained rental ski equipment and quality ski resorts. Future research should investigate more elements of the internal, external, and situational factors of Shank and Lyberger's (2015) sport consumption behavior model as well as further explore differences between non-experienced and experienced perceptions, because some perceptions may not reflect reality (Gilbert & Hudson, 2000). Although the sample is not representative for the Chinese population, the current study provides some preliminary insights of the problems that the ski industry is facing and offered some recommendations for marketing activities that would be applicable to both non-skiers and skiers, thereby offering suggestions for the ski industry to grow by: (1) attracting new participants, (2) preventing current participants from dropping out, (3) and increasing current participants' participation rates.

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