

Youth Sport Market Segmentation with the Theory of Planned Behavior

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Approximately half (54%) of all American youth between the ages of 6 -17 play in at least one organized sport (SGMA: Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, 2004). By adulthood; however, only 15.4% of American adults report that they participate in the same organized sport (SGMA, 2004). While this deficit can be explained by an expansion of alternate activities available to adults or a lack of continued opportunities, there is evidence that adult participation in sports and other leisure activities is significantly influenced by the repertoire of activities they participated in as children (Scott & Willits, 1989; 1998). Sport managers would benefit from a more thorough understanding of the reasons for initial involvement and the intentions to continue participation in guiding future retention efforts.

Researchers and policy-makers have begun to examine the long-term ramifications of youth involvement in sports and other leisure activities. These results have suggested that enjoyable participation in activities during childhood and adolescence can result in a "leisure for life" philosophy. For example Scott and Willits (1989; 1998) found that participation in sport activities as an adolescent to be a strong predictor of involvement as an adult even after controlling for gender, education and income. In examining youth sport participation, Perkins, et al. (2004) found that young adults were not likely to participate in sport if they had not participated in the past. Their study corroborated earlier findings by Telama, et al. (1997) and Engstrom (1991) suggesting that sport participation at age twelve significantly predicted young adulthood sport participation. These findings suggest that youth are more likely to continue participation in an activity if they begin participating at a younger age. The challenge for the sport industry is to determine how to either keep individuals engaged in sport over the course of their life or attract adults back to familiar sport activities. A more thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to initial and enduring involvement in youth sports would facilitate this goal.

The theoretical foundation of this research, which has been used extensively to understand participation in sport and exercise activities, is the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), and its extension, the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). The theory of reasoned action proposed that one's intention to perform a behavior is formed by the individual's attitudes held toward the behavior and his or her measure of subjective norm (social influence). The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985; 1988; 1991) was developed as a deliberate attempt to broaden the applicability of the theory of reasoned action to include non-volitional behaviors by incorporating explicit considerations of perceptions of control over performance of the behavior as an additional predictor variable of intention. The theory of planned behavior can serve as a model to look at how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control will influence the intention to play or continue to play a sport. The theory of planned behavior has been successfully applied to the prediction of a number of different behaviors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, using illegal drugs, sexual behaviors, health screening attendance, adhering to a low-fat diet, breast/testicle self-examinations, food choice, and sport and exercise participation (for recent reviews, see Ajzen, 2006; Armitage & Connor, 2001).

Participants in this study were 181 (99% response rate) students at a middle school (mean age 12 years old; 46% female, 54% male) that offered an after-school intramural sports program in a variety of sports (basketball, cheerleading, flag football, floor hockey, soccer, ultimate games, and volleyball). Participants were asked to complete a web-based questionnaire during school hours under teacher and researcher supervision. Due non-normal item distribution and sample size limitations, Somers' d ordinal regression was used to determine the relationship between the attitudes, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control in explaining intention to participate in each sport.

The results indicated that based on the sport, the participant's intention to continue involvement differed based on the theory of planned behavior variables. For example, attitude toward the sport explained 27% of intention for flag football participants, while 48% for floor hockey participants. With perceived behavioral control the opposite was found with 48% of intention explained with flag football and only 25% explained in floor hockey. In examining intention, attitude was the primary predictor for floor hockey and ultimate games participants. Subjective norm explained the largest percentage of intent for basketball and

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cheerleading. Perceived behavioral control was the best predictor of intent for flag football, soccer, and volleyball.

Results from this study provide insight into how the theory of planned behavior may differ in a similar population based on sport choice. From a theoretical standpoint, this study presents unique findings in relation to the theory of planned behavior with sport and exercise activities where attitude and perceived behavioral control have been found to be the primary predictors of intention (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002). While each sport is offered in the same environment, the decision-making choice of the participants is unique to the attributes and the actual and perceived benefits of the sport. The results provide insight into the decision-making process that creates continued intention to participate in a given activity. Traditional attitude-based marketing tactics may not be as effective in comparison to tactics that emphasize social influences or creating environments where children feel more in control of their behavior in sports such as basketball and soccer. Perceived competence may play an important role for continuation of the sport into adulthood, whereby they develop skills early and form competence to play later in life. Detailed results and sport-specific marketing implications will be discussed in the presentation.