Older Adults in Competitive Sports: Their Motivation, Involvement, and Health Perception

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Sport tourism is a type of special interest tourism trend that is gaining in popularity. According to Gibson (1998), active sport tourism involves people who travel in order to participate in sporting events. An example of active sport tourism is participating in competitive sport such as Senior Games. It is an annual state-run athletic competition for individuals 50 and older. The elderly boomer population in the United States is increasing disproportionately hence research on older adults’ participation and sport tourism behavior becomes more important. Each of the 50 states hosts senior athletic events annually and these events are dedicated to encouraging older adults to lead a healthy lifestyle. Research shows that participating in athletic events provides both personal and social benefits among older adults (Siegenthaler & O’Dell, 2003; Smith & Storandt, 1997). Stathi, Fox, and McKenna (2002) also demonstrated that physical activity contributes to subjective well-being, as well as, mental health among older adults. Given that the active participation in physical activities is an important factor of well-being of older adults, investigating the motives and involvement to those activities may give better insights to understanding the structure of an active and healthy life style.

It can be assumed that those who are committed and participate in competitive sporting events - such as Senior Games - would demonstrate a healthy lifestyle. Understanding such active lifestyle patterns would provide broader views of older consumers for marketers in sport industries. Investigating “how and why those older adults compete” and “how healthy those older adults are” will contribute to the body of knowledge in the sport management literature.

While a number of researchers have examined physical health and enjoyment as consequences of sport motivation and involvement in sport, there has been lack of attention given to sport behavior of older adults. Moreover, since participating in leisure is an important component of older adults especially among the retirees (Nimrod, 2007), it is timely to examine whether there is difference in behavioral factors between and the retired and employed older adults. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to provide the demographic and activity profiles, and also investigates the motivation factors, involvement, and perception of health of senior athletes.

Method

One hundred and three older adults from 2009 Indiana Senior Games were the subjects in this study. Adults aged 50 and over were recruited at the event sites, and the investigators administered the questionnaires in person. The investigators approached each subject and asked them to complete questionnaires on a voluntary basis.

Instrumentation

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS) by Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, and Tuson (1995) was employed. The SMS is a 28-item instrument and is composed of seven subscales – three types of intrinsic motivation, three types of extrinsic motivation, and one amotivation. Sample items of SMS include “For the pleasure I feel in living exciting experiences” and “To show others how good I am at my sport.” Using a 7-point Likert scale, respondents will be asked to answer from “does not correspond at all (1)” to “corresponds exactly (7).”

Involvement in sport was measured using behavior consistency and affective attachment. As described by Goff, Fick, and Oppliger (1997), behavior consistency is “consistent of focused behavior over time which implies rejection of alternative behaviors” (p. 51). This study included two items from Goff et al.’s study. Three items used in Goff et al.’s study were adapted to measure affective attachment. Since their study was concerned with runners, and this study consists of senior athletes, minimal wording changes were made in order to incorporate older adults in the questions.
Ware, Kosinski, and Keller’s (1995) SF-12 Health Survey was used to examine physical and mental health. The items in this instrument are purported to measure health concepts such as physical functioning, bodily pain, role limitations due to physical health and emotional problems, general mental health, and social functioning. The use of this instrument has been validated in a number of studies (e.g., Ganz, Rowland, Desmond, Meyerowitz, & Wyatt, 1998; Zhuang, Teng, Jeffery, Gemery, d'Othee, & Bettmann, 2002).

Results

The study sample was composed of 84 males and 19 females. 85.4% of the subjects were married, and 77.7% of the subjects had beyond college education. 58.3% of the subjects were retired, and 96.1% of the subjects were Caucasians. Years of participating in Senior Games ranged from 1 year to 31 years (mean = 4.50, SD = 5.48), and participants spent more than 7 hours a week to play sport (mean = 7.61, SD = 5.74). The participants indicated that they traveled 107.07 miles on average to participate in the event (SD = 134.86), and intended to spend $131.98 (SD = 290.17) during the event.

Descriptive statistics revealed that retired senior athletes scored higher on intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, affective attachment, behavioral consistency, physical health, and mental health. Independent t-tests were used to test for a difference between the means of study variables between retired and employed senior athletes. A significant mean difference was found regarding physical health (t = -2.033, p<.05), affective attachment (t = -2.074, p<.05), and behavioral consistency (t = -2.633, p<.01).

Discussion

This study showed that retired senior athletes were more likely to have higher physical health perception and were more involved in Senior Games than employed senior athletes. This was consistent with Heo and Lee's (2005) prior study of Senior Games that the value and importance of sport activity would increase after the retirement, and therefore their commitment and involvement in sport activity might also increase. Given that participating in Senior Games may be understood as pursuit of well-being of older adults, the findings of this study also supports previous study in that perception of well-being tends to be higher as people get older (Horley & Lavery, 1995).

The demographic information provided in this study will give the event organizer a better understanding of senior athletes and may allow for target marketing and services for older adults. Often, marketers view the older adults as a homogenous segment, although this market is a diverse in term of socioeconomic, interest, lifestyles, attitudes and consumption patterns (Horneman, Carter, Wei, & Ruys, 2000). Therefore, this study can help sport managers to better reach and meet the needs of the participants, leading to increased participation and satisfaction in their involvement. Several issues should be considered when interpreting the result of the study. First this study was based on a convenience sampling. Additionally, most participants in this study were Caucasian (96.1%), and their education level was relatively high. Further studies may expand the geographic coverage in data collection because Senior Games participants in other states may have different opinions as well as different levels of involvement. Perhaps, comparison with participants from other states will provide important benchmarks to facilitate the understanding of the findings.