An Examination of the Motivations and Constraints of Sport Participants

Michael Naylor, Auckland University of Technology
Jordan Bass, Florida State University
Y. K. Kim (Advisor), Florida State University

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There have been calls for sport management scholars to work towards an enhanced understanding of how sport can promote social good (Chalip, 2006; Zeigler, 2007). One way to accomplish this is to explore physically active sport participation, which has been linked to positive outcomes for both individuals and society (World Health Organization, 2004). Overall, scholarly work focused on sport participation is underrepresented in the sport management literature. Two aspects of the psychology of sport participants, motivation and constraints, have been recently linked together (Loucks-Atkinson & Mannell, 2007; Son, Mowen & Kerstetter, 2008; White, 2008), but more work is necessary to meaningfully inform practitioners. The body of work on motivation and sport participation is mostly found in sport psychology journals, despite the fact that this knowledge should be of considerable interest to sport managers. Likewise, the majority of scholarly work focused on constraints in physical activity settings can be found in leisure literature, despite the fact that understanding and helping participants overcome constraints also ought to be of interest to sport managers.

It is essential for work of this type to be based on theory. An ecological model of behavior focuses on “individual influences as well as on social and environmental factors that may facilitate or inhibit individual behavior” (Spence & Lee, 2003, p. 8). An ecological model should include multiple levels of influence that determine individual behavior. Levels of influence can be categorized as either intra-individual (person) or extra-individual (environment). The current research is grounded in an ecological model framework in that the variables examined can be characterized as both intra-individual and extra-individual.

The purpose of the research is to develop an understanding of the motivations and constraints of sport participants through a consumer behavior lens. The research is significant because North American citizens are increasingly inactive (Sapkota, Bowles, Ham & Kohl, 2006), and a better understanding of how and why people participate may lead to increased involvement and enjoyment of associated physiological, psychological, and sociological benefits. The current research is also significant because to date, marketing efforts designed to increase sport participation have not been successful (Lera-Lopez & Rapun-Garate, 2005). In fact, there has been a dearth of research examining the marketing of sport participation, although there has been some recent activity (Nigg & Estabrooks, 2003; Taks & Scheerder, 2006). The current research is important because a solid understanding of motivation and constraints is required to inform marketing practices designed to increase sport participation.

Motivation has been defined as “an internal force that directs behavior toward the fulfillment of needs” (Shank, 2009, p. 116). One of the most widely accepted and utilized conceptualizations of motivation comes from self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to SDT, motivation can be categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic, and both are the result of perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Intrinsic motivation refers to the perception that rewards are inherent to the activity itself while extrinsic motivation occurs when expected outcomes or contingencies are external. de Charms’ (1968) view of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation being mutually exclusive has been replaced by a more contemporary view that people can be motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically simultaneously (e.g., Vlachopoulos, Karageorghis & Terry, 2000). It is now widely believed that actions reflect varying degrees of a self-determined motivation (Grouzet, Vallerand, Thill & Provencher, 2004). A third type of motivation, amotivation “concerns the various forms of not having either intention or energy directed toward action” (Ryan & Deci, 2007, p. 6). Amotivated individuals do not meaningfully link their actions with outcomes (Pelletier et al., 1995). Amotivation is linked to neither extrinsic nor intrinsic motivation, and it may result in a discontinuation of action. Incorporating an SDT conceptualization of motivation in the current research is important because it will shed light on the type of motivation felt by sport participants rather than the strength of motivation which has typically been the focus of research of this type.

The most accepted definition of constraints is that they are “the factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived by individuals to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment of leisure” (Jackson, 1993, p. 273). It should be noted that unlike barriers, constraints are not static, immovable objects that preclude participation (Jackson, 2005). Constraints can be categorized as interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural (Crawford et al., 1991). Intrapersonal constraints (psychological states) can be classified as an intra-individual factor, while interpersonal constraints (interactions and relations) and structural constraints (environmental interference factors) can be classified as extra-individual factors from an ecological perspective. The inclusion of constraints in the current model is aligned with recent attention paid to analyzing barriers as they relate to sport participation demand (Lera-Lopez & Rapun-Garate, 2005).
The focus in this area of research has moved from identifying constraints specific to a given sport or recreation setting to developing a theoretical understanding of the constraint negotiation process (e.g., Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). The process of negotiating constraints was first discussed by Scott (1991), but has lately received increasing attention through the use of both qualitative (e.g., Koca, Henderson, Asci & Bulga, 2009) and quantitative (e.g., Loucks-Atkinson & Mannell, 2007) designs. Studying the impact of motivation on constraints in conjunction with negotiation processes has also received recent interest (Alexandris, Tsorbatzoudis & Grouios, 2002; Nam, Cho & Goo, 2009). In fact, examining constraints alongside motivation and negotiation reflects the most recent trend in constraints research.

A questionnaire has been administered to a purposeful sample of over 700 sport participants within a mid-size, southeastern U.S. city to ensure an equitable mix of men and women and to be representative of four age groups (18-30, 31-39, 40-54, 55+). The instrument features demographic and behavioral items, the Sport Motivation Scale 6 (SMS-6; Mallett et al., 2007), constraint items (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997) and negotiation items (Alexandris et al., 2007). A model has been theorized and with data collection now complete, data will be examined using structural equation modeling procedures in MPlus 6 statistical software based on the following hypothesized relationships:

*Hypothesis 1*: Motivation is positively related to sport participation.

*Hypothesis 2*: Constraints are negatively related to sport participation.

*Hypothesis 3*: Constraint negotiation is positively related to sport participation.

*Hypothesis 4*: Constraints are positively related to constraint negotiation.

Findings from this research will be useful to sport managers as they try to build and sustain interest in sport participation. Knowledge about the way that sport participants are motivated, the constraints that they face and the tools that they use to negotiate constraints can be used by sport managers to shape offerings and by marketers as they develop communications. The research is novel because of the incorporation of comprehensive statistical procedures and explicit focus on sport participation within the broader domain of physical activity.