Consumer Profiles of Participants at Triathlon Events

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Triathlon, the endurance sport including the three disciplines swimming, cycling, and running, has considerably grown during recent years in several countries such as the U.S. (Smith, 2010), Australia (Chang & Johnson, 1995), New Zealand (Martin & Pancoska, 2010), Japan (Harada, Onishi, Kojima, & Ishii, 2010), and Germany (German Triathlon Union, 2011). Given the growth in triathlon, it is crucial for managers of triathlon events to know more about the participants and to target them adequately. This task is in particular not easy to accomplish as there are four main distances where triathletes can take part in: sprint distance, short (Olympic) distance, middle distance (Half Ironman), and long distance (Ironman). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the characteristics of participants at triathlon events and elaborate consumer profiles of triathletes. The study has two main research questions: 1) can the heterogeneous group of triathletes be subdivided into smaller sub-groups? and 2) what is the typical consumer profile of a triathlete taking part in a sprint distance triathlon, a short distance triathlon, a middle distance triathlon, and a long distance triathlon? This paper contributes to the body of research on consumer segmentation in sport.

Generally speaking, there are three main procedures to segment consumers, namely demographic, psychographic, and behavioural (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick & Funk, 2009). Psychographics include the consumer's lifestyle, i.e. activities and interests (Wells, 1975). Evidently, demographics present the foundation of the segmentation which is enriched by psychographics and behavioural factors (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 1998; Rohm, Milne & McDonald, 2006; Trail & James, 2001). A few studies on consumer segmentation have been undertaken in triathlon. In a Japanese study, triathlon participants were segmented based on their motivation (Harada et al., 2010). The authors confirmed four clusters including maniacal triathletes, triathletes with hidden potential to become maniacal triathletes, experienced triathletes with a tendency of decreasing motivation, and triathletes with unclear motivation. Case and Branch (2001) examined selected demographics and psychographics such as commitment to physical activity, values, and motivations of off-road triathlon participants. They found out that the main motivation of triathletes was the opportunity to test one’s skills against nature, others, and oneself. The triathletes were characterized by a high level of commitment to their sport with fun, enjoyment, and excitement being the most important values.

For the purpose of the current study, primary data was collected using a nationwide online survey of active triathletes in Germany. The link to the online questionnaire was distributed via the newsletter of the Bonn triathlon and published on social networks. Data were collected from December 21, 2010 to January 27, 2011 and a total of n=786 triathletes completed the online survey. A multiple segmentation approach was applied including behavioural, psychographic (lifestyle), and demographic segmentation variables. The data analysis consisted of four main steps. First, descriptive statistics were carried out to provide an overview of the sample structure. Second, an exploratory principal component factor analysis with oblique promax rotation was conducted to reduce the number of variables to a smaller number of factors. Third, a cluster analysis was used to investigate whether there the heterogeneous group of triathletes could be subdivided into more homogeneous sub-groups. Fourth, regression analyses were run to find out the determinants of participation in the four types of triathlon events.

The descriptive results showed that the respondents were 36.7 years old on average and 22% were female. Most respondents were well-educated and had at least A-levels, the university entrance diploma in Germany. The triathletes’ average monthly income was between €2,000 and €2,500 and they spent on average €2,745 per year on their sport. On average, the respondents have practiced triathlon for 7.4 years with a weekly participation time of 548.5 minutes. The factor analysis revealed seven factors labelled effort, life experience, social, active sport, passive sport, media, and career. The cluster analysis resulted in five clusters, namely workaholics, champions, grannies, socialisers, and rookies. The regression models showed that time and money (effort) were needed to participate in races of all distances. Triathletes with a professional career were found to participate in significantly more long
distance races than in sprint distance events.

The sample structure of this study was similar to the structure of previous triathlon samples indicating that the average triathlete is a well-educated and affluent male in the mid thirties (e.g., Case & Branch, 2001). The factor analysis could be considered fruitful for reducing the number of variables and for indicating which variables were related to each other. The results of the cluster analysis indicated that behavioural, psychographic (lifestyle), and demographic segmentation variables were useful to segment triathlon participants. The concrete clusters were difficult to compare with previous studies as those studies used different variables (e.g., Case & Branch, 2001). The regression models revealed that the professional career was negatively associated with sprint triathlon events, but positively correlated with the long distance events. One explanation could be that triathletes who are successful in their job try to find new challenges outside their professional career. This finding is in accordance with prior research suggesting that the super-adherer in sports was also found to be a super-adherer in everyday life (Clingman & Hilliard, 1987).

This study has implications for sport managers and marketers. The results showed that triathletes could be considered affluent consumers who spent one monthly salary on their sport. Therefore, it could be worth targeting these consumers from an economic perspective. Triathletes represent an interesting consumer group, also for companies outside of the triathlon or sport market such as travel or tourism agencies. The five groups of consumers should be targeted specifically by considering the monetary and time-related efforts they put in triathlon, their professional career, and the way they spend their leisure time. For example, the communication mix should be adjusted depending on whether the triathletes are likely to spend lots of time in front of the computer (media), watch other sport events (passive sport), or undertake social activities (social).

The current study has some limitations that also represent directions for future research. The first limitation relates to the type of sample as only a convenience sample was drawn and no random sample. Second, the study only focuses on triathlon participants who are already consumers of the sport. However, from a marketing perspective it would also be interesting to know more about non-consumers, i.e. potential consumers.