Underlying Factors Influencing Sport Management Graduate Students' School Choice Decisions: A Means-End Analytic Approach

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Introduction
Currently, there are 454 institutions housing an undergraduate and/or graduate sport management program in the United States; and this number continues to grow annually. Given this statistic, understanding the factors influencing students’ choices of what college to attend and what academic major to pursue holds important implications for academic programmers and university stakeholders. Several studies have previously examined the factors impacting the school choice decisions of student-athletes (SA) (e.g., Barden et al., 2013; Klenosky et al., 2001; Magnusen, 2012; Popp et al., 2011); however, little to no research has investigated the factors influencing these types of decisions among the general student population (i.e., non-SAs). To address this gap in the literature, the present study sought to explore the factors that impact student decisions to pursue a post-baccalaureate (i.e., graduate) degree in sport management.

Literature Review
One perspective for studying the factors involved in the decision-making process centers upon the use of means-end theory. Originally developed to better understand the range of meanings associated with the goods and services that individuals purchase and consume (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984), means-end theory is based on the assumption that an individual’s decisions are influenced by characteristics that elicit desirable benefits and avoid undesirable costs.

Central to the present study, means-end theory focuses on product meanings at three levels of abstraction (Klenosky et al., 1993). At the first level are attributes, which are defined as relatively tangible or observable characteristic of a good or service. Within the context of a sport management graduate program, attributes might include availability of funding, proximity to a large, sport-centered city, and a diverse set of course offerings. At the second level are consequences, which are more abstract meanings that refer to the outcomes or benefits associated with purchasing or consuming a good or service. Examples of consequences for a sport management graduate program might include gaining applied and practical experience, making one more marketable within the sporting industry, and receiving a post-baccalaureate degree. Values, the final level of meaning, refer to highly abstract beliefs about desired end-states of existence that help guide decision making and human behavior (e.g., Kahle, 1983; Rokeach, 1968; Verhoff et al., 1981). For a sport management graduate program, personal values might include a sense of achievement, accomplishment, and security.

In means-end theory, attributes obtain their importance through the consequences or benefits they confer. Similarly, consequences obtain their importance through the values they help reinforce. Taken together, the pattern of associations that connect attributes to consequences, and subsequently consequences to personal values, is conceptualized as a simple model referred to as a means-end chain (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). Within the context of sport management graduate student school selection decisions, a means-end chain might link the attribute (e.g., proximity to a large, sport-centered city), with the consequence (e.g., gaining applied and practical experience), and finally to the value (e.g., feeling a sense of achievement). Previous research has used the means-end perspective to examine SA school choice decision-making (Klenosky et al., 2001), outdoor and recreation experiences (Goldenberg et al., 2000, 2002, 2005), and tourism destination decisions (Klenosky, 2002; Klenosky et al., 1999; Thirkettle et al., 2013). Within the context of the present study, the means-end approach is employed to examine the factors underlying the graduate school-choice decisions of students within a sport management graduate program.
program.

**Data and Methodology**
Means-end data were collected using semi-structured, one-on-one laddering interviews (Klenosky et al., 1993; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The technique is referred to as laddering because it focuses on eliciting responses that climb the “ladder” of abstraction (i.e., from relatively concrete attributes, to more abstract consequences, and finally to highly abstract personal values). Participants consisted of students currently enrolled in a sport management graduate program at a mid-sized university located in the Midwestern United States and were recruited via email and through Blackboard course websites. In each laddering interview, respondents were first asked to identify the attributes of the selected school and graduate sport management program. Follow-up questions (in the form of “why is that good or beneficial” or “why is that important to you”) were then asked to identify the consequence(s) provided by each attribute as well as the value(s) associated with each consequence. The set of means-end chains were then summarized across the study sample.

**Results**
In total, 39 graduate students (12 females, 27 males; mean age = 24.8 years) participated in the present study. Based on the interviews conducted, a number of representative ladders and means-end chains were established. One means-end chain example linked the attribute of a graduate assistantship, with the consequence of not having to take out a student loan, to finally the value of increased financial security after graduation. A second example linked the location of the school being very close to a major (sports) city (i.e., the attribute), with providing networking opportunities with professionals in the field (i.e., the consequence), to finally obtaining a job in professional sports (i.e., achievement). Overall, through the conceptualization and creation of a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM), the set of means-end chains obtained were summarized across the study sample.

**Discussion and Implications**
Findings from the present study contribute to our understanding of the factors underlying sport management graduate students’ school choice decisions. More specifically, students appear to place the most value on financial and job-related security. As a result, creating incentives for graduate student to attend (e.g., through offering GA positions and providing practical and applied professional development opportunities) will enhance and optimize efforts to recruit and retain high-quality graduate students and improve sport management graduate programs. Complete descriptive statistics, means-end chains (through a complete HVM), study limitations, and implications for sport management researchers, programmers, and stakeholders are discussed.