A Critical Analysis of the Impact of Competitiveness and Sensation Seeking Research on Product Marketing in Mountain Biking

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Mountain biking was born in the late 1970s in California (Berto, 1999) and in its early years was made up of only downhill and cross-country racing (Savre, Saint-Martin, & Terret, 2009; 2010). Since then however, mountain biking has evolved to become a pluralistic and specialised sport with an associated market, which has been described as highly segmented (McEwan & Weston, in press). Cycling is a large global industry (Oortwijn, 2013) and in the United States, mountain bikes are the most popular product making up around a quarter of all cycle sales (National Bike Dealers Association, 2015). Anecdotally however, the continued buoyance of the cycling market has been challenged (Harker, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; Sutton, 2015) and therefore a need arises for the industry to ensure that it is adequately aware of its consumer base in order to safeguard against declining product sales.

Recent research has found that six core market segments exist within mountain biking, all with significantly differing products offered to the market for riders to purchase and consume (McEwan & Weston, in press). However, further research has also found that within the mountain bike media, product-advertising materials portray four differing, idealised identity archetypes (McEwan, 2015). Aligning these archetypes with the six market segments has in itself been shown to be problematic and has been highlighted as an issue which requires further analysis (McEwan, 2016).

The insinuation within McEwan’s (2015) work is that the proposed archetypes could possibly be reflected amongst participants within the sport, in relation to two particular psychological traits characteristics: Competitiveness (Smither and Houston, 1992; Houston, Harris, McIntire, & Francis, 2002; Harris & Houston, 2010) and Sensation Seeking (Zuckerman, Kolin, Price, & Zoob, 1964; Zuckerman, 1971; 1979). McEwan (2015) hypothesises that these trait characteristics could be used to discern differences between consumers within the mountain bike market, related to the style of riding they take part in. This paper seeks to continue this strand of analytical investigation via two concurrent research projects related to the Competitiveness and Sensation Seeking traits exhibited amongst two samples of regular and committed mountain bike participants.

In the first study, participants (N=926) completed the Sensation Seeking Form-V questionnaire (Zuckerman, et al., 1978) while in the second investigation, respondents (N=167) completed the Revised Competitiveness Index (Houston, Harris, McIntire, & Francis, 2002). In both studies the questionnaires were completed online and respondents voluntarily took part without incentive. The ordinal nature of both data sets meant that a non-parametric analysis was conducted and these included Mann-Whitney U Tests (Mann and Whitney, 1947) and Kruskal-Wallis H Tests (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952). The results supported the four-archetype model proposed and reinforced the dichotomous relationship with Competitiveness and Sensation Seeking described by McEwan (2015) in relation to the differing groups within the sport of mountain biking.

In extreme sports, where the associated lifestyle is as important as the sporting activity itself (Thornton, 1996; Wheaton, 2004; Puchan, 2005), products take on a culturally symbolic nature (Rosen, 1999) and facilitate subcultural authenticity for participants (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Using this concept and drawing on the market segments established by McEwan and Weston (in press), and the analysis performed in this research, this paper highlights the critical message for those marketing products to mountain bike participants. This is that it is essential that products are correctly marketed to the consumers and in this case, marketing should take on a psychological dimension related to risk taking behaviours and traditional forms of sporting contest.

Reflecting critically on the results of these two studies, it is concluded that there is a fundamental misalignment within the cycling industry between the four idealised identities portrayed within advertising materials and the six separate market segments that have been established within the sport. The cycling industry is therefore urged to
ensure that products are marketed to appeal to consumers by aligning with the psychological traits established as being exhibited by consumers present in each of the four archetypal groups. Equally, the industry is advised of the danger of marketing similar products across archetypal groups using the same imagery and messages, where such practices may in fact deter and not attract consumers.

In addition to the impact that this has on the practices used within the cycling industry to market products, this research also adds to a rich vein of emerging research on the sport of mountain biking and, in particular, sheds a greater light on the characteristics of participants within the sport.