Reassessment of Risk in Active Sport Involvement

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Participation and spectatorship in active leisure pursuits is on the rise, which is evidenced through the writing of several authors (Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013; Ridinger, Funk, Jordan, & Kaplanidou, 2012). Scholars have subsequently made efforts to understand the consumer behavior of ice skaters and hockey players (Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000), recreational runners (Beaton, Funk, Jordam, & Ridinger, 2011; Ridinger et al., 2012), and recreational cyclists (Ritchie, Tkaczynski, & Faulks, 2010). Within the active participant context, academics have also endeavored to capture the level of psychological connection a participant has to a specific sport object, as this connection is believed to have a significant effect on consumer behavior (Funk & James, 2001; 2006; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003).

Citing the emergence of distinct psychological and behavioral outcomes based on the level of psychological connection one has to a sport object, Beaton, Funk, and Alexandris (2009) and Beaton and colleagues (2011) conceptualized and tested a staging mechanism to place participants within the framework of the PCM. The mechanism is operationalized by three antecedents of the involvement construct – sign, centrality, and pleasure. This mechanism however does not include the element of risk; an antecedent conceptualized and tested in previous scholarship on the involvement construct (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Kapferer & Laurent, 1985; 1993; Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998), and believed to assist in the operationalization of the PCM (Funk & James, 2001). The purpose of this study is to analyze the antecedents of involvement that are currently being used by scholars in collaboration with the PCM staging mechanism – sign, centrality, and pleasure (Beaton et al., 2009; 2011; Doyle et al., 2013) – and to reassess the significance of risk within the active leisure participant context.

To conduct this study, I propose a twofold approach. First, following the suggestion made by Funk and James (2016) in their writing on the PCM, I communicate with the active participant consumer in an effort to understand their involvement with the activity. Involvement-related scholarship lacks recent efforts to communicate with the active participant, with most-recent efforts in the sport domain to capture involvement in the study conducted by Kerstetter and Kovich (1997). Further, allowing participants to address their free-thoughts regarding their involvement is viewed as a favorable practice when endeavoring to capture thoughts elicited by a stimuli (Ross, James, and Vargas, 2006). I endeavor to capture the involvement of active participant bikepackers. Bikepacking, or backpacking with a bike, is generally viewed as a multi-day adventure where an individual packs their belongings – tent, food, water, all-weather clothing, and spare bike parts – for the purposes of survival and assistance in reaching a predetermined destination (see Howard, 2011; Thigpen, 2014). These natural aspects assist in the defining of an active participant pursuit that is greatly filled with risk.

To engage with members of this participant community, I trained for and competed in two bikepacking events in southeast United States in 2016. In an attempt to capture a range of responses I engaged with study participants, active bikepackers, before (n=5), during, (n=4), and after (n=6) the two races, actively making an effort to reach out to a diverse group of individuals with different ages (ranging between 29 and 54 years); different experience levels (a few months to over 20 years of experience); and gender (13 male and 2 female; 83 males and 14 females in total started between both races). Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded.

Major identifiable themes were degree of importance of the activity, derived pleasure, and symbolic expression; interviewees expressed that bikepacking is an important part of their life (centrality), in which a sense of pleasure can be derived from participation (pleasure), where it is believed that others – loved ones and close friends – understand and support them along the way as bikepackers (sign). When asked to express their thoughts on the perceived risk associated with bikepacking, the interviewees were able to touch on several risks, some coming from personal experience. ‘You know, I’m sure you get the questions: aren’t you worried about this or that?’ said one of the participants. ‘There’s the biggest and most common thing, you could break something and of course you could die.’
Several other passages mirrored the above sentiment. Respondents reported various performance risks (Selin, 1987). Performance risks as specified by active bikepackers included getting lost, not knowing what to do in a given situation, or even death. Within bikepacking and other active sport settings, it can be posited that there are inherent risks involved with participation. In an effort to capture the involvement profiles of a larger group of active participants and to verify the viability of performance risk as a facet of involvement – a theme emerging from the first section of the study – a survey of members of bikepacking communities is in progress.

Section two of this study involves the formulation of an involvement scale, with involvement factors and items generated from involvement scholarship and interview transcripts. The 16 item scale measures the involvement facets of pleasure, centrality, sign, and performance risk. The pleasure facet consists of 4 items; 2 items from the work of Kyle and Mowen (2005) and 2 items from the interviews (e.g. ‘I bikepack because it is exhilarating’). Centrality is measured by 4 items; 2 items derived from the work of Kyle and Mowen (2005) and 2 items generated from the interviews (e.g. ‘I bikepack because it is what I love’). Sign is measured by 4 items; 2 items from the work of Kyle and Mowen (2005), and 2 items from interviews (e.g. ‘Bikepacking allows me to look inward at myself’). The facet performance risk is measured by 4 items, all generated from interviews (e.g. ‘I am aware of the risks associated with bikepacking’, ‘I am prepared to handle a performance injury while bikepacking’). Collected data will be analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Specifically, I will run an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to assess the factor structure of the measured items, and present an argument based on the results for future research on the underlying facets of the involvement construct.

Risk has been questioned as an antecedent to involvement (Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997; Kyle & Mowen, 2005), yet many of these concerns stem from the involvement of spectators rather than active participants. Doyle and colleagues (2013) empirically test spectators of sport and argue that there are fundamental differences between spectators and participants. This distinction is not accounted for in current literature, and I further believe this lack of distinction has muddled the clarity of the involvement construct and overall predictive power of the segmentation tool for the PCM. This research is designed to assess the level of involvement participants have to the activity of bikepacking. Through interviews with active participants, performance risk emerged as a significant theme alongside pleasure, centrality, and sign. An empirical analysis of a larger sample of active bikepackers will be conducted to provide evidence for or against the viability of performance risk as an involvement facet within the bikepacking context. I will present the empirical findings, provide support for the factor structure of involvement within the active participant context, and with these findings, encourage streams of research within other active leisure settings. As we progress into the Contextual Period (Funk & James, 2016), I find it beneficial to communicate with the individual consumer. Uncovering the involvement nuances of specific participant communities will advance our knowledge of the active participant consumer and allow for marketers to engage in strategic marketing with unique consumer bases.