Youth Sports and Socioeconomic Influences on Sports Brand Awareness and Athletic Participation Disparities: Creating the next sports consumer.

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Introduction

Figuring out what sports to participate in as a youth can be as easy as figuring out your athletic skillset and/or what sport you're truly passionate; however, your options may narrow or never be exposed to certain sports due to opportunities outside the youth's socioeconomic status. As a youth, we all develop sport identification and affiliate ourselves with those individuals that also participate within those sport(s) social circles. Bourdieu says, individuals identify and associate themselves with "a system of class-based tastes and preferences that are determined by the endowments of capital" (Rungo & Sanchez-Santos, 2022). These youth athletes hold buying power, through their parents and their future selves, which can be heavily influenced based on their decision to pursue certain sports. Though barriers exist for sports participation for youths due to socioeconomic factors - these status-quo barriers continue to be challenged and improvements in elevating youth sports brand awareness effectiveness. Leading rise to spectatorship and consumer behavior traits in habitus influences beyond an individual's formative years.

Youth Athletes' Sport Participation and Exposure

Parental influences are massive across all youth sport participation programs. Parents may want their child to be involved in a sport due to its levels of safety, their child's and their own socialization, overall financial cost, etc. Many parents consider the social ramifications of their child participating in specific sports, such as their own adult friends enrolling their children and knowing the other children involved share similar backgrounds or varying for cultural exposure.

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Personal Youth Sport Exposure

My parents enrolled me in soccer, and a few other sports like baseball, basketball, and golf throughout my formative years. I played flag football as well since Pop Warner (with pads) seemed too dangerous for me to participate to them. Soccer or futbal was my true passion that took most of my time and effort. My parents recognized that and continued to put me in positions to succeed and excel within the sport. As a military brat, we moved every two to four years. They had to find new youth sports programs at each new location. My teammates and coaches constantly changed throughout my soccer experience.

I even had a three-year stint in Bitburg, Germany that I played on my village club team. I found it hard to communicate with my teammates initially, but we all tried to learn basic German and English phrases. Communication within games was less verbal and more reading physical cues on where to pass the ball, where to position myself, and when to shoot. This experience helped me develop my intelligence quotient (IQ) for reading the game of soccer.

Sports brand awareness was developed through my surroundings, favorite athletes, and teammates' gear. My parents made many of the sports consumer choices for me for several years. Then gradually developing individual preferences for cleats, jerseys, and other soccer related apparel. My socioeconomic factors were made-up of less barriers due to my parent's ability to afford sports programs or apparel I developed interest in during my adolescents.

Socioeconomic barriers to entry can carry heavy weight on many households. My parents held a unique access to many youth sports opportunities through military base administered programs. These programs involved mostly military families, so sharing similar lifestyles and social influences bridge certain divides. The cost of participation within these programs wasn't free, but very affordable for youths with varying financial backgrounds within the armed forces. Which allowed me to pick and choose what I was interested in, or my parents felt I'd be interested in participating.

Parental Controls and Developing a New Consumer

Youth sports participants are anticipated sports consumers, while their parents make sports purchases advantageous to their child. Youth sports can be a valuable developmental tool for parents to wield. Youth athletes can only hope their parents invest their time and money into the sports they develop real interest towards. The social benefits of sport and joining a team is a powerful explanation for adolescents' interest in sport (Allen, 2005).

In Mura and Côté's (2022) study of consumer behavior and parents in youth ice hockey, fifteen semi-structured interviews (seven moms and eight dads) with parents were conducted. They used thematic analysis to break down the interview transcripts. Post analysis, parents are "influenced by a variety of external pressures…rather than their personal perceptions and assessments of program quality" (Mura & Côté, 2022). These findings point toward a unique process of consumption, which purchasing behavior influences are due to their cultural world, social groups, and children's potential attainments of non-sport outcomes (life skills, friendships, etc.), instead of their satisfaction with the youth sports program. These surveyed parents were dissatisfied with

the youth sports program quality and did not see improvements to the program as a likelihood (Mura & Côté, 2022). The conclusions of the study – a quality feedback channel for parents of children's youth programs should be in place, parents' satisfaction with their purchase is correlated to stress and frustration with youth sports program purchases, which should be considered. Approaching youth sports parents with consumer behavior strategies like association, brand loyalty, consumer satisfaction, and more can build a stronger relationship between the two entities.

Parental perceptions of safety of youth sports became even more complex post COVID-19 pandemic. Certain sports like soccer and basketball benefited from the exposure of football's short and long-term negative health effects. Parents who enroll their children in sports see certain social and goal attainment benefits. Parents can be dealing with financial stress of enrolling their child in sport(s) and making sure their child is involved in a sport that improves their health and well-being is above all else. Parents weigh risks and benefits involved in a sport more than their child. These parental value systems vary by socioeconomic status, race, gender, and ethno-racial influences (Bush, Bunds., Casper, Bocarro, Edwards, Thompson & Kanters, 2023).

Youth Goal/Task Orientation and Belief in Sport Achievement

Youth sports participants do not tend to consider career advancement, through obtained skills and social benefits attached to sports participation. Parents see sports opportunities for their children as steppingstones to beneficial relationships with fun, socialization, creativity, self-expression, and other skills they can use to positively affect the trajectory of the young life they are responsible to nurture. Sports provide youth the opportunity to develop a competitive spirit and build their resiliency to mistakes and setbacks in other facets of their life (White, Duda & Keller, 1998).

Dedicating your life to sports can be very rewarding, but not necessary to continue an individual's passion for sport. Fostering healthy competition and sportsmanship can translate to other aspects of an individual's life in extraordinarily ways.

Creating a connectivity to nature and youth going outdoors can yield positive outcomes towards recreational sport and career advancement (Lackey, Brandsma & Rose, 2022). Connection to nature (CTN) is more prominent within lower income households. There is also a link between CTN and participation in organized as compared to unorganized recreational sport (Lackey, 2022). Households that are more resource burdened by other facets of life (rent, providing for their family, etc.) find alternative ways to get their children involved in sport. Some communities view sport(s) as their escape from reality or their current situation. Building avenues for disenfranchised youth to dream bigger and see other avenues to success has become big initiatives led by prominent athletes and society's figureheads. Expanding access to organized youth sports programs can lead to an even larger sports consumer base once they mature into the role.

Balancing the Participation Inequalities

Spanberg (2023) presents the facts and speculations within this ever-changing landscape of youth sports development. Cultivating the next generation of athletes and sports consumers remains a difficult undertaking, due in large part to poor funding for youth sports and lose of interest. A special few upper-class youths can participate in niche sporting events that garner worldwide attention at events like the Olympic Games. Bridging the gap to find talent in underserved

communities and nurture it takes money that governmental entities do not seem to want to put tax dollars towards.

United States sports leagues and governing bodies, including the NFL, NBA, MLB, WNBA, NHL, PGA, and MLS are investing heavily into youth sports programs and not just the top-tier pipelines. Their motivation in large part for lifelong fandom attached with early sports participation (Spanberg, 2023). Bridging the gap between upper, middle, and low-income households is increasingly difficult and post pandemic led to even larger challenges. Connecting youth with sports programs and keeping them interested or monetarily invested in niche sports is a momentous challenge. Co-Chair of the United States Olympics and Paralympics Commission's (USOPC) Dionne Koller, spoke about the issues our country faces when cultivating talent across the country at an event called Project Play (2023). Bridging socioeconomic gaps is not a light undertaking, but a philanthropic effort that many have chosen to commit their time and resources.

Individual versus Team Sports Participation

When considering the selection of youth sports, parents draw on proceeded pathways to future success of their child. Financially well-endowed parents tend to place their children in individual sports, for example, golf, tennis, horseback riding (equestrians), snowboarding or skiing (Goldsmith & Abel, 2022). These translate to low numbers of competitors, due to the financial barriers and thresholds only a select few can cross with ease. Socialization within such athletic circles is stunted but provides other athletes with similar means of opportunity and backgrounds.

On the flip side of the coin, team activities tend to be more of the common mans' sports. Lower financial barriers to climb for access (Wallace, 2021). Many people were involved in some kind of recreational youth sports team. Different lessons are taught in different sports, but individual versus team sports lead to different perceptions of success and outcomes. Team sports allow individuals to depend on and learn from others mistakes and successes. While individual sports lead to a more inward journey for answers. Youth athletes' perceptions of fun and enjoyment within their chosen sport can be heavily warped by their surroundings (Clarahan, 2021). Especially if that sport was chosen for them by their parents or peers.

Reference Group Constraints or Habitus

Considering influences of close friends or family members, athletes tend to lean towards the familiar. Habitus is generated through social structure and the different lifestyles associated with each social class. Sports marketers need to explore non-traditional routes to reach younger generations, for example, TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms that reach the youth interested in sport. Understanding the needs and most effective ways to reach the next generation of athletes and sports consumers is very complex. Separating youth into one segment is not seen as an effective means of conveyance. Mass marketing to youth athletes can yield interesting results but be ineffective at curating relevant content to connect the consumer to the product. Many youth sports apparel and marketing campaigns have focused on appealing to parents and their financial constraints. Stefansen and Eriksen (2022) stated that "researchers have documented that across classes, parents' engagement in youth sports has increased and changed during the last few decades; we see a more supportive and invested parental role."

Youth & Brand Association

Establishing a strong bond/connection with youth athletes can cultivate sports entities brand awareness. "Understanding team brand associations is important as they can contribute to the team's awareness, image, ability to generate revenue, and fan's overall loyalty" (Kim, Choi, Williams & Walsh, 2015). There is not extensive research into youth consumers brand awareness, but building ties to sports teams when you're an adolescent makes for a solid foundation. Youth athlete's consumer behavior is ever changing. For many youth sports fan, your proximity to a professional sports team garners interest. "As youth fans continue to grow in their roles as consumers, it becomes vital for sport organizations to understand the brand associations that these important consumers have for their team" (Kim, 2015). Consistent revenue generation upon major investments into youth sports seems like a quality correlation. Sports fans span many generations and capitalizing on all of them as consumers is the goal of sports entities.

Youth consumers are a becoming a valued target market segment and their complexity as consumers is rising. Kim, Choi, Williams, and Walsh (2015) conducted a study that "utilized a free-thought listing technique with children ranging from 4 to 14 years of age in order to examine the specific team brand associations held by youth fans." The study's results concluded that youth brand association strength for sports teams is largely focused more on "product related attributes as the most common associations mentioned…team's star players, brand marks, the way the team plays, or simply that they mentioned the sport itself" (Kim, 2015). Youth sports consumer segments seem to focus on the intricacies an organization has to offer and less on the overall brand itself. Establishing an approachable and accessible

product to market to the next generation of sports consumers can be difficult when trends that youths follow change so rapidly.

Conclusion

Increasing complexity on these socioeconomic disparities has necessitated this discussion and the creation of the future sports consumer. Regardless of these disparities, sports organizations need to be ready for youth athletes to mature into consumers with billions of dollars in spending-power (Stevens, Lathrop & Bradish, 2005). Youth sports consumption is quite unique; parents lead the consumption trends then transition to narrowed interests by their youth athlete as they mature. The decision-making process adapts from a consumer that shops for someone other than themselves (with rapidly changing interests), towards a consumer that initiates purchases based on experience and brand awareness. Consumer segmentation of youth sports is still viewed through a lens of skepticism and misunderstanding. Developing effective marketing technics for the next generation is a massive undertaking that shows phenomenal promise for future sports entities revenue generation efforts.

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