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The Triathlon sport consumer.
A segmentation proposal

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Abstract

In the last decades, triathlon has gained globally an increased popularity. This sport is now a worldwide diffused discipline: triathletes can choose between a wide number of challenges and events, taking place in different corners of the world. The exponential growth of this sport has led to an increasingly relevant weight of triathlon in economic terms: in 2014, revenues of triathlon industry were estimated in $ 2.8 billion only in the United States (Triathlon Business International, 2015). The phenomenon started being increasingly studied by marketing and management research. From a consumer behaviour point of view, triathlon is a quite underresearched topic is related to triathletes' motivational analysis. Particularly relevant, also in practical terms, appears motivation analysis aimed at identifying the characteristics of individuals performing this peculiar sport discipline. Few works have applied segmentation to the triathlon sport context, while in other sport contexts segmentation was instead applied in a wider number of contributions.

The present research provides an additional point of view on triathlon athletes by providing a segmentation with respect to international triathlon events. Results provide insights both on athletes' inner characteristics, trigger some considerations about how to harness differences and peculiarities of different athletes, from the point of view of sport event managing organizations. A discussion of touristic implications of triathlon sport events is also provided.

Introduction. Since 1977, as the first IRONMAN championship was disputed, triathlon has globally experienced an increasing popularity and success. Despite the specific peculiarities of this discipline that make it a quite selective activity, triathlon has equally experienced a remarkable growth in terms of number of performing athletes (e.g., Chang and Johnson, 2005; Wicker et al, 2012). Such an increased interest and participation can be justified by the *shift* in the status of triathlon in the last decades, from its initial *niche* connotation. From its inclusion in the Olympic sport disciplines triathlon has in fact gained a worldwide visibility, enhanced and strongly supported, for example, by the extensive media coverage of Olympic events. The rising importance of triathlon in economic terms, it has been also increasingly investigated by management and marketing literature (e.g., Chang and Johnson, 1995; Darnell and Sparks, 2007; Devine et al, 2010; Martin and Pancoska, 2010a; Wicker et

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al, 2012). However, also with respect to other sport contexts, triathlon appears not to be, so far, a well-researched topic by marketing literature, especially with respect to sport participants (see Phelps and Dickinson, 2010; Wicker et al, 2012). The present work wants to offer an additional contribution with respect to motivation analysis of triathletes, joining the existing managerial and marketing literature related to sport segmentation, and more specifically, in a triathlon context.

Sport segmentation. According to Funk et al (2016) existing studies related to sport segmentation have focused on different contexts: sport enthusiasts (e.g., Zhang et al, 2003; Koo et al, 2009; Zapalac et al, 2010; Wicker et al, 2012), sport participants (Chapman and De Castro, 1990; Rohm et al, 2006; Liu et al, 2010; Kim and Ritchie, 2014), and sporting events, considering both enthusiasts and participants (e.g., Tkaczyski and Rundle-Thiele, 2011).

With respect to triathlon, as far as it is known, few are the studies focused on the application of segmentation to triathletes. Chang and Johnson (1995) propose a segmentation based on their membership to sport clubs; Harada et al (2010) propose a segmentation of triathletes basing on their motivation. Case and Branch (2001) consider specific sociodemographic and psychographic variables in their segmentation of the triathlon market. Matsui (2009) also provided alternative segmentations of triathletes.

Sport events have, undoubtedly, a strong impact in touristic terms (e.g., Fourie, 2011). In particular, triathlon sport events entail a strong contact with the surrounding physical setting: hence, the touristic component has been identified by practitioners as a key attribute of the overall system of offering of a triathlon sport event (e.g., see Coelho, 2016). From this point of view, therefore, segmentation appears particularly useful to design successful, differentiated strategies.

The empirical study. Design. The present work is based on a random sample of triathletes participating to international triathlon events, both in Italy and abroad. Data were collected in the following sport events, between May and July 2015:
- Triathlon Internazionale di Bardolino (Italy);
- Ironman Klagenfurt (Austria);
- Rimini Triathlon Challenge (Italy);
- Prealpi Triathlon Fest Revine Lago (Italy).

A quantitative questionnaire has been developed, basing on the existing marketing contributions on sport segmentation, and on triathlon. The questionnaire was almost entirely based on 7-point Likert scales (1: completely agree; 7: completely disagree). A specific section profiled respondents according to training characteristics: in this case, the RPE scale of perceived exertion (Borg, 1982) was employed. Usable responses resulted to be 775.

The empirical study. Methodology. Varimax method has been applied. KMO and Bartlett tests confirmed the adequacy of factor analysis (0.845 and $p = .000$). Factors have been identified considering as a threshold eigenvalues higher than 1.0. 7 factors were hence identified, explaining 63,37% of the total variance. The seven extracted

factors were labeled as follows (reliability and explained variances are reported in parenthesis): *leisure* (α= 0,8629; 6,93%), *nature/atmosphere* (α=0,8140; 7,63%), *services/amenities* (α=0,7639; 6,41%), *self-perception* (α=0,9346; 17,08%), *involvement* (α=0,8775; 9,25%), *fidelization* (α=0,9203; 9,42%), *satisfaction* (α=0,9502; 6,66%). Note that the Chronbach's α, computed for each factor, is always quite larger than the threshold value of 0.5 (Felder and Spurlin, 2005), hence suggesting a good reliability for all the factors extracted.

Two different cluster analysis techniques have been developed. First, a hierarchical cluster analysis has been developed to determine the number of clusters. Second, a K-mean clustering technique has been carried out, determining in this way that the solution with the three clusters was the most appropriate.

Discussion. Common traits of single clusters. Some common socio-demographic characteristics among clusters should be noted: **a)** an apparent predominance of male individuals; **b)** sport club membership is strongly diffused among individuals in the sample: in all the identified clusters there is a high percentage of athletes being members of sport clubs. (65,5%, 78%, 78,8% for cluster 1, 2, 3 respectively); **c)** Athletes largely define themselves, in all the identified clusters, as amateurs; **d)** Athletes' age generally falls into the range 25-45 years old; and **e)** the average yearly expenditures for triathlon usually fall within the range 1,000-5,000 Euro. Several people also declare even lower triathlon expenditures, lower than 1,000 Euros (around 20-30% in each cluster).

Cluster 1: "Indifferent". Cluster 1 presents the smallest size among the identified clusters. In general, for all the seven factors previously extracted, cluster 1 shows very low scores. People in this group might consider triathlon merely as a hobby, not interesting in the deeper, inner dynamics of the discipline (for example, psychological implications of training and performance). Indifference demonstrated also in the case of service level (factor *service/amenities*) might confirm this interpretation. A slightly higher interest was shown in the case of the *nature/atmosphere* factor, suggesting that, individuals comprised in cluster 1 could be more interested in the touristic aspects of the triathlon event, rather than the sport event per se.

Cluster 2: "Amateurs". Cluster 2 presents more defined trends with respect to cluster 1. Cluster 2 is largest in terms of size (42,5% of the total sample). Looking at the average scores, they are quite higher than cluster 1.

The athletes of this cluster show a stronger commitment to the sport context, departing from the generalized indifference expressed by individuals of Cluster 1. In particular, individuals comprised in this second group show a low level of scores related to *self-perception*. This suggests the key characteristic of cluster 2: a good performance is important for these individuals, but, at the same time, it is worth to note that triathlon does not assume such a central role in their everyday life. Instead, it is perceived as an interesting, challenging experience where "doing good" is important, but, after all, it is considered as a recreational activity.

Cluster 3: "Professionals". Cluster 3 shows the highest scores among the identified clusters. In this case the athletes show a strong commitment to triathlon. Participating to the sport event has a very strong importance, a point that is highlighted by the high scores related, again, to the factor *self-perception*. Individuals in this cluster are strongly motivated; in addition, triathlon is, for them, a strong component of their lives, even if they do not define themselves as professional athletes. It follows that, every aspect of a triathlon sport event is accurately considered and evaluated by these individuals, from the atmosphere and location, to the level of service. Such individuals represent, therefore, the most demanding and structured segment.

Implications for sport marketers. Conclusions. The segmentation proposed in this work confirms the need, for sport marketers, to develop strong analytic capabilities regarding their patronage. Particularly, the focus of the present work -triathlon- confirms the importance of developing an offering as holistic as possible, combining a rigorous sport management with a strong and relevant emotional content, maximizing, in some cases, local touristic potential.

With respect to the specific context of triathlon, an interesting consideration could refer to managing organizations. Being themselves experts of the discipline (i.e., organization members are former or active athletes) might represent a strong source of competitive advantage, in defining and developing an actual *dialogue* with relevant customers.

Triathlon sport events entail a strong interaction with the surrounding context, especially during the challenge tout-court. This suggests the important role these events can have in terms of maximizing the touristic potential of specific locations. The results of this work confirm this point, particularly for highly committed individuals. In addition, this touristic potential appears even more important given that, committed athletes (that could be, in this study, "professionals" and "amateurs") are usually social influencers (Triathlon Business International, 2015), being able to orient consumption choices of a wide number of people. From this point of view, triathlon sport events can play as protagonists in designing and shaping the touristic identity of locations, with implications in terms of destination branding.

Taking a wider perspective, in service contexts, in which the provider adopts an experiential perspective, trying to develop components of the offering with the aim to deliver to the consumer a unique and, as far as possible, irreplaceable experience (e.g., Pine and Gilmore, 2012), market segmentation still appears a fundamental step in the definition of strategies using differentiation as a key pillar of competitive advantage.

The trends delineated above find fertile ground in sport management, that increasingly requires tools from business and management practice in order to develop and sustain the competitive advantage of the different service providers. Triathlon represents, from this point of view, one of the sport disciplines with the highest potential, that literature has only recently started considering from a marketing point of view. This work is intended to enrich literature on sport segmentation, and on the specific context of triathlon; further research efforts could be directed in identifying strategies of destination branding and touristic implications

in the case of triathlon sport events, hosted within a local context.

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