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Characterizing and Categorizing the Essence of Sport Consumption Behavior: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Sport consumer decision making is a complex process in which an individual evaluates, acquires, uses, or disposes of sport products or services. This qualitative study aimed to identify, understand, and describe the essential characteristics of sport products consumption behavior among professional athletes in Thailand. In-depth interviewing was carried out on 25 professional athlete consumers who responded to semi-structured questions regarding their sport goods consumption. Thematic analysis was performed on the transcripts to describe the essential characteristics of the consumption and to identify overarching topics. Following social constructionism, three themes (i.e., acquisition, use, and disposal) were analyzed and eight categories (i.e., economy concern, gender independence, internet reliance, inquisitive mind, visibility quest, brand focus, environmental concern, gifting preference) were induced. The findings gave insight into athlete consumers' behavioral characteristics in term of their sport products consumption. Understanding these points contributes to gaining leverage in planning a domestic marketing strategy for this kind of goods.

Keywords

sport products consumption, consumer behavior, sport marketing, athlete consumer, thematic analysis

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Characterizing and Categorizing the Essence of Sport Consumption Behavior: A Thematic Analysis

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Sport consumer decision making is a complex process in which an individual evaluates, acquires, uses, or disposes of sport products or services. This qualitative study aimed to identify, understand, and describe the essential characteristics of sport products consumption behavior among professional athletes in Thailand. In-depth interviewing was carried out on 25 professional athlete consumers who responded to semi-structured questions regarding their sport goods consumption. Thematic analysis was performed on the transcripts to describe the essential characteristics of the consumption and to identify overarching topics. Following social constructionism, three themes (i.e., acquisition, use, and disposal) were analyzed and eight categories (i.e., economy concern, gender independence, internet reliance, inquisitive mind, visibility quest, brand focus, environmental concern, gifting preference) were induced. The findings gave insight into athlete consumers' behavioral characteristics in term of their sport products consumption. Understanding these points contributes to gaining leverage in planning a domestic marketing strategy for this kind of goods.

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Introduction

The sport industry continues to grow continually as people become increasingly aware of their health and fitness in the wake of public health crisis (Chiu & Won, 2016; Funk et al., 2016), especially the COVID-19 pandemic. As an alternative, sport is recognized as a resort for leisure, recreation, and enjoyment (Hedhli et al., 2016). Consumers are progressively spending on sport-related products including athletic clothing, accessories, and relevant equipment. As markets throughout the world becoming increasingly more competitive, understanding consumers determines the practice of marketing sports goods and accessories (Baker et al., 2018).

Thailand's sport product and accessory market is expanding vigorously and is characterized by recently opening of novel online retail outlets and launching of trendy local brands. E-commerce was asserted to contribute to the thriving of the sport product industry (Norum, 2008). Online commerce has become a staple in sport industry nowadays all the available brands strive to gain presence on the digital platform (Mudrick et al., 2019) and to be an all-in-one point of purchase for all desired sport accessories and equipment in the market.

However, the sport product and accessories markets are highly competitive because of the combination of multiple established market players in retail, e-commerce, sports stores, and wholesalers, with many new startups joining frequently (Fujak et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2016). It also faces negative competition from counterfeit sporting equipment and accessories, along with cheaper low-quality variants. During the time when healthy living is of unprecedented

importance, the increasing sense of health-consciousness amongst the consumers is expected to stimulate the demand for athletic equipment (Norum, 2008; Pascual-Miguel et al., 2015). Additionally, the rising trend to follow the prominent sport players will drive the accessory business.

Since the turn of the century, sport consumption has been a prominent focus of consumer behavior research (Baker et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2016). This is due to the commercialization trend in sport. The study on sport consumption tends to be varied and extensive. This has included describing attendance and participation at sport events and investigating sport, recreation, and relevant consumption behaviors such as sport media (Fujak et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2016), sport merchandise (Kim & Trail, 2010), hospitality service (Mudrick et al., 2019), and sport tourism (Gammon et al., 2017).

Thailand's economy seems to be growing and progressing at a slow but steady pace (Reuters, 2020) though the market has experienced occasional sessions of political turbulences, and subsequently, adverse economic fallout since the last decade (Driediger & Bhatiasevi, 2019). Some sectors (e.g., consumer product categories and e-commerce) tend to do better than others. Sport products firms are no exception — striving to broaden their reach into and their market share of the sport population.

In Thailand, the increasing number of middle-class consumers tend to pamper themselves with fine products, tend to purchase one brand over another and regularly engage in online shopping via social media (Meng & Han, 2016). If marketers can stay close to their customers, they may be able reveal what the consumers need even before the consumers know it themselves. Today's disruptive technology such as the digital communication and the electronic financial transaction gives us insights into unpredictable consumer behavior and shapes the way we devise a marketing strategy (Meng & Han, 2016; Pascual-Miguel et al., 2015).

The market report issued in the third quarter of 2019 by Kasikorn Research Center (2020) identified a rise in experiential and indulgent products. It was argued that a rise in the sales of pampering products signified better household economies, with some dispensable items such as bakery, confection, bottled water, and shower cream being indulged in by middle-income families by an increase of 10–15% from 2015 to 2018.

Health-conscious consumers in Thailand are presumably middle-class and have an average monthly household income of US \$1,500 or higher (Kasikorn Research Center, 2020). This cohort is on the rise and acts as a new front in Thailand's sport industry and the country's economy given that they represent demand from consumers resulting in stiffer competition and the need for improved quality of goods and services. This segment of consumers represents a marketing prospect in certain product categories including hygiene products, trade-up offerings, luxury items, and experiential products (Meng & Han, 2016). Businesses that can capitalize on their brand power will be well-positioned to increase their market share when targeting this market segment.

This study is expected to extend knowledge on consumption behavior among predominantly middle-income professional athletes who understand the details, technique, or principles of a sport and so presumably are competent to act as a critical judge about a sport product in terms of the property, use, and quality. In addition, they were knowledgeable about exercise and health promotion which is an indispensable quality of sport product offerings. This tenet will in turn contribute to the formulation of a marketing strategy within the context of the sporting goods industry in the country. The marketing strategy for these products fundamentally shaped the sport industry in Thailand. The next section is the literature review that articulates consumer characteristics, sport consumption, and relevant theoretical underpinnings.

Literature Review

Consumers make decisions across different settings. Consumer characteristics have been extensively studied in the marketing literature for various reasons, for example, to understand brand or product identities (e.g., Chernev et al., 2011; White & Dahl, 2007), to assess consumer motivation (e.g., Klein et al., 2015). Consumer characteristics are considered a salient factor in consumer behavior (Funk et al., 2016).

In sport contexts, consumer behavior is often understood to refer to the process of gaining an experience with sport (Baker et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2016)—it could be attending a sporting event, participating in a match, joining a sport team, or shopping for sporting goods. It is supposed to be the kind of consumption experience that involves sport activities and events (Chiu & Won, 2016; Funk et al., 2016). This sport experience is the essence of sport consumer behavior in the same way that it is important for non-sport products. Sport consumers are inclined to satisfy their inherent needs and to seek rewards from the sport consumption experience (Ha & Stoel, 2009; Mudrick et al., 2019).

Sport marketers often attempt to underscore the importance of the sport experience through shopping activities and consumption behavior (Stewart et al., 2003). The amount of time and money allocated to sport consumption often bring about behavioral consequences from some experiential journey (Funk et al., 2016). Such an experience has often been thought of as being in some way analogous to the pathway by which sport consumers choose to gratify themselves (Baker et al., 2018). From this perspective, sport consumer behavior and consumption activities signify fulfillment of the journey. As a result, sport marketing professionals should help individuals achieve the joy of the journey.

The quantity of resources that individual consumers give to sport and sporting events reflects their willingness to have such experience and gratification (Chernev et al., 2011; White & Dahl, 2007). The action aligns with the pathway one uses to travel towards experiences and desired outcomes. From this perspective, sport consumption and related behavior that occur at sport event destinations facilitate access to the experience (Chernev et al., 2011; Funk et al., 2016). As a result, a sport marketing professional can help individuals gain pleasure throughout the trip.

Sport consumer behavior as a discipline is developed from the general field of consumer behavior. As such, it can be described as a process of individuals selecting, paying for, using, and owning sport-related products and services that meet their needs (Funk et al., 2016). Consumption behavior is concerned with an action performed in searching for, participating in, and evaluating sport activities that consumers believe will fulfill their needs (Baker et al., 2018).

The theory of reasoned action provides a framework for identifying and measuring the underlying reasons for a consumer's intent to engage in a certain consumption (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The findings confirmed that athletes' consumption behavior is determined by attitudes and subjective norms. Specifically, the study shed light on the attitude toward resources parsimony, gender empowerment, online presence, inquisitiveness, conspicuous consumption, brand following, environment protection, and social deeds. I identified the critical characteristics that bore evidence to the essence of sport products consumption in the context of Thai professional athletes.

The study relates to the concepts in the theory of reasoned action such as behavior, behavioral intention, attitude, behavioral belief, normative belief, and subjective norm (Jaccard, 2012). A specific behavior is defined by four components: an action (i.e., consuming sport products), a target (i.e., professional athletes), a context (i.e., outside a sport venue), and time (i.e., any time). Their behavior was clearly influenced by subjective norm pertaining to

the belief of people surrounding them, for example, impressing others with their sport possessions.

Sport Consumer Characteristics

Sport consumer behavior is a perplexing subject to learn about (Baker et al., 2018). Some consumers attend sport events regularly while others join only randomly. There are also some consumers who spend most of their time in sport facilities and exploring the internet while others watch sport on paid channels. Some read sport magazines while others listen to sports on the radio. Some decide to play professional sports, while others select to dabble in amateur sports, or other recreational outdoors activities. Consumers engage in sport with varying frequency in the same way they acquire sport goods. To sum up, sport consumers experience sports in different ways.

Consumption of sport products has a sizeable economic force in the sport industry (Casper, 2007). As a result, sport marketing professionals have made serious efforts to augment the attractiveness of sport products (Chernev et al., 2011; White & Dahl, 2007). Sport has the capability to drive an individual's way of life in several fashions both directly and indirectly. Sport can promote health and well-being, strengthen social bonds, and boost a sense of community. Moreover, it can bolster the economy and help shape national heritage as well as cultural characteristics (Funk et al., 2016). Only when sport consumer behavior is understood can sense be made of why people play and watch sport. Sport marketers are likely to find themselves at the forefront in the battle to improve the quality of life as sport and leisure activities become central components of promoting healthy lifestyles and building more integrated communities. The athlete consumer is the heart and soul of the sport industry because it determines the development and growth of sport market (White & Dahl, 2007), especially in sport event sponsorship, sports equipment, sport apparel, athlete representation, etc.). Thus, the consumption of professional athletes has been recognized as a vital activity in the industry (White & Dahl, 2007). The current study aims to address the following research question:

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of the consumption behavior of athlete consumers relative to sport products?

Sport Consumption Categorization

Sport consumer behavior represents consumer behavior relative to the products and services offered in the sport and leisure industry (Terason et al., 2019). Built upon this characterization, sport consumer behavior is modeled as a process involving the selection, purchase, use, and disposal of sport-related products and services. This process comes to pass when businesses seek certain benefits from sport consumption experience. This definition views sport consumption behavior as a holistic process that demonstrates how individuals make decisions to spend existing time and money on sport consumption activities (Fujak et al., 2018).

Sproles and Kendall (1986) characterized consumer decision-making and categorized it into eight styles, namely brand consciousness, quality consciousness, recreational shopping, confusion by over choice, impulsiveness, price consciousness, novelty or fashion, and brand loyalty. Consumers tend to relate price with quality as well as favor well-known brands over generic ones. Consumers do not accept products of mediocre quality. Some consumers view shopping as enjoyable activity. They might be overwhelmed by the sheer number of product variants. Some do not plan their shopping beforehand. They might watch for discounts or promotional items to get the best deal. Some are thrilled by novelty while others are loyal to

brands. This study might yield different findings from that by Sproles and Kendall. This study, however, focuses on consumption by a different consumer niche. This leads to the following research question:

Research Question 2: How can the sport products consumption characteristics of athlete consumers be categorized?

Sport Consumption Theoretical Underpinnings

The theory of reasoned action was first developed in the late 1960s by Martin Fishbein and later, revised in collaboration with Icek Ajzen. The theory proposes that each of us has an intention for our behavior in specific situation (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). We may or may not act on that intent. A consumer might plan or think about making a purchase but may or may not actually perform the purchase as planned. The essence of the theory postulates that consumers act on behavior based on their intention to bring about a particular outcome. It aims to explain what leads a consumer to engage in a certain consumption behavior by advocating the precedence of attitude and subjective norm, i.e., these two antecedents influence the purchase behavior (Ha & Stoel, 2009).

Attitude concerns a person's positive or negative feelings about engaging in a specific behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It is a function of beliefs, for example, when a behavior is believed to contribute to desired outcome, it is likely that we will perform such a behavior. Once we receive a favorable outcome, we tend to hold that for future behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). On the contrary, when we believe a behavior will lead to mostly negative outcomes, we will hold an unfavorable attitude. The beliefs that underlie a person's attitude toward the behavior are termed behavioral beliefs.

Subjective norm is a function of beliefs that dictate our decision to perform a certain behavior and these beliefs underlying a person's subjective norm is called a normative belief (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Subjective norm refers to beliefs about what surrounding people such as family members, friends and colleagues think about the behavior, including their influences and expectations on our behavior. Sometimes it happens to us that we behave according to the expectation of other people instead of being guided by our own attitude.

A person's intention is determined by a combination of two related factors: the personal factor and the social factor (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The personal factor is an individual's evaluation of an outcome which could be positive or negative when performing the behavior, so it is defined as attitude toward behavior. The social determinant of intention is an individual's perception of the social pressure which is also known as subjective norm. It contributes to a decision on whether to perform or not to perform a behavior because it is influenced by perceived prescriptions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Not enough of the prior sport marketing studies were founded on this theory. The tenet of this theory helps us understand better the mechanism and reasoning in consumer decision. The theory of reasoned action leads to the following research question:

Research Question 3: What are the implications of sport products consumption behavior among athletes on the theory of reasoned action?

Method

Social constructionism suggests that individuals construct knowledge and meaning through social participation within a social context (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hodges, 2011). It is suggested that in a social interaction, we create multiple meanings, and the process is affected

by cultural, social, ethnic, and linguistic elements (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism encourages a researcher to be critical of conventional knowledge which is based on an objective representation of the world (Burr, 2015; Hodges, 2011).

Assuming the role of an academic who was intrigued by the flourishing growth of the sport industry in the last decade, I took a qualitative approach to scientifically investigate the phenomenon of sport consumption by athletes. This empirical inquiry aimed to identify, understand, and describe the essential characteristics of sport products consumption behavior among professional athletes in Thailand. Initially, we gathered all details of the sample's experience which helped us gain a deeper understanding of the sport consumption mechanism. Then, experience drawn from in-depth interviewing was used as empirical indicators, under the assumption that multiple realities exist and create meaning for the individual (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). The method section involves the selection and description of study participants, as well as the research design including data-collection and data-analytic strategies.

Study Participants

It is usually not possible to recruit a random sample for qualitative study because small samples are inherently unrepresentative (Hair et al., 2021). In the interviews I used 25 professional athletes selected by purposive sampling (Patton, 2014). Although participants were alike in term of occupation, there are differences among them along the following parameters: age, gender, recent purchase frequency and volume. Participants included 16 male and nine female athletes with a mean age of 45.65 ($SD = 8.65$). Most of them completed the bachelor's education ($n = 12, 48\%$). The participants consisted of athletes in individual sports ($n = 11, 44\%$), dual sports ($n = 8, 32\%$), and team sports ($n = 6, 24\%$). They resided in different areas: urban ($n = 11, 44\%$), suburban ($n = 4, 16\%$), and rural ($n = 10, 40\%$). On average, they have 9.2 years of experience in sporting events participation ($SD = 4.09$) and an average monthly income of US\$ 33,032 ($SD = 328.02$). Specifically, the selection was based on certain characteristics associated with an individual's average monthly income of at least US\$15,000 and that individual's acquisition of sport products during the previous month in terms of frequency and purchase volume. That is, they were supposed to have made purchases of sport merchandise which amounted to at least \$100 in total during the last 30 days.

Data Collection

Identification Procedures

The interview protocol was developed from an extensive review of the literature. The questions focused on consumption behavior and habits relative to sport products which incorporated exercise, fitness, and recreation equipment. All interviews were semi-structured. The questions provided structure but also allowed flexibility to respond to issues deemed important for participants. The questions used in the study were built upon the definition by Funk et al. (2016) that sport consumer behavior is the process involved when individuals select, purchase, use, and dispose of sport and sport-related products.

Initially, ethics approval was secured from the university. In-depth interviews were conducted in person ($n = 5$) and electronically ($n = 20$). A total of 25 interview sessions were set up; each session lasted around two hours. The interviewed participants represent different sport categories (i.e., individual, dual, and team sports). I commenced the session by giving an overview of the study including the purpose and nature of the study and advised that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Participation in the research was

voluntary and no incentives were offered for participation. Once the participants had provided their written consent, I commenced the session.

Each interview was recorded for later data analysis. The interviews were transcribed by the interviewer and notation was taken of any prolonged silences, laughter, and any uttered sounds to give depth and insight to the setting of the interview. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Finally, the participants were asked to share their thoughts or views on the topic and then I thanked them for their time.

Some sample open-ended questions are: “What are your consumption activities relative to sport products?” “How much importance do you attach to a sport product purchase experience and why?” “How do you prefer sport products to be delivered to you?” “Who in your family has a say in the acquisition of sport products?” “How do you obtain a sport product of your choice?” “In what way do use your sport product?” and “What is the foremost purpose of possessing a sport product?” “How do you dispose of a sport product when you do not need it anymore, and why so?”

Analysis

Data-Analytic Strategy

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic analysis technique as it allows for theoretical flexibility, and details reporting of patterns in the data and interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As such, this method was appropriate for this study since the study was of an exploratory nature and its findings were to be categorized into meaningful themes. The qualitative method posits that codes and concepts do not have to be mutually inclusive or exclusive, one code and meaning can be applied to numerous cases (Goulding, 2005). Accordingly, two researchers independently carried out open and axial coding on the interview transcripts following guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013) and Vikas et al. (2015).

The thematic analysis process was divided into small tasks. First, I familiarized myself with the data by perusing the transcripts multiple times until I was fully conversant with the participants’ responses. Second, codes were generated to aid the interpretation of the data so that they reflected each participant’s consumption behavior and shopping habits. Next, I searched the data for main themes or concepts which brought to light the overall picture of sport consumer behavior. In the end, I presented quotes to support themes and categories in the results section as suggested by Popay et al. (1998).

Methodological Integrity

In qualitative research, validity (the degree to which an instrument measures what it purports to measure) and reliability (the consistency with which it measures over time) are addressed differently from quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1998) proposed trustworthiness which consists of four criteria which are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, for qualitative research.

Validity (or credibility) suggests whether the findings are accurate and credible from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the readers (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A thick description of the research context is a primary method for establishing credibility (Shenton, 2004), so a background or detailed picture of the research environment was provided in the Introduction section. The audience was hoped to have a better understanding of the behavior of the participants in the context of sport products consumption and to derive contextualized meaning. To achieve this goal, I described the study’s setting, research participants, and their related experiences. Moreover, I asked three individuals with industry

experience and marketing expertise to review and evaluate the report in a process known as “external audit” or “peer debriefing” and discussed the coding and thematic mapping with them to ensure the credibility of the themes I discovered.

Dependability (or reliability) concerns whether the findings are consistent with the data collected. To ensure interrater reliability, I arranged for two independent coders who were highly esteemed Thai academics in sport marketing to examine the interview transcript and to review the coded responses against each main theme until it became apparent that participants identified as sport product consumers revealed their characteristics. The Kappa coefficient is used to check coding consistency between coders in qualitative research and is a widely used measure of Inter-coder reliability (Lombard et al., 2002). The coders came to agreement 82% of the time (Cohen’s Kappa = .82, $p < .001$). After the initial interview transcript had been coded and yielded sufficiently meaningful findings, I proceeded to the data gathering phase for analysis.

Confirmability parallels the objectivity in quantitative research. It implies that the findings are bias-free, and objective. To achieve this goal, I identified and uncovered the decision trail for public judgment. However hard it was, I was reflexive and illustrated how data could be traced back to its origins by using audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, I kept records of raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, materials relating to intentions and dispositions, and instrument development information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

It is important to note here the purpose of the study was to explore how sport consumer behavior is characterized. The research questions centers about the sport consumption behavior of professional athletes in Thailand. The technique of thematic analysis was employed. A total of three themes were demonstrated, namely, product acquisition, product use, and product disposal. In turn, this information should shed light on the marketing strategy for the sporting goods industry in Thailand. Following the social constructionist thematic analysis, eight main superordinate categories were developed:

Theme 1: Acquisition

Category 1: Economy Concern

Economy is defined as careful use and management of available resources, particularly money. When a sport consumer is concerned about money spent on sport products, he or she tends to be thrifty. Thriftiness is characterized by a careful use of money and avoiding waste and is associated with utility maximization (Gatersleben et al., 2019), or, in simple terms, making the most use of a purchase. Contrary to Fujak et al. (2018)’s findings that sport consumers exhibited unique behaviors, particularly loyalty, from traditional consumer products, I found their purchase sensitive to pricing strategies rather than brand-loyal. Valerie, a former swimming champion and a current trainer, validated the idea of thrift:

I only buy stuff when it is on sale. Why do I have to spend more for the same value? You just have to watch for some seasonal sportswear sales at the shopping mall often in December. That is when you will get the best bang for the buck. They always put really good stuff on sale. (Valerie)

Athlete consumers did not care whether it is a brick-and-mortar transaction or online ecommerce if they can get the lowest price. It was also found that marketing hype or status-based claim had no bearing on their purchase decision. Instead, they would conduct research on various available offerings during acquisition. Neil, a martial arts instructor, pointed out, “When I buy sport equipment, I always look for a real bargain. I likely will wait till it comes along. I don’t rush myself.”

Additionally, athlete consumers are open to store or private brands as Andy, a professional boxer, noted, “I will go for store brands that are cheaper. I am not attached to a brand name but drawn to a reasonable price. Boxing doesn’t require much gear anyway” (Andy).

This study found consumers to bear some resemblance to Sproles and Kendall (1986) in terms of consumer price consciousness. This suggests price has always been a fundamental concern in consumption decision — so obvious that sometimes quality receives less attention. In other words, they find “good enough” products acceptable. Therefore, it is posited:

Proposition 1: Professional athletes are inclined to use sport products in such a way that they take account of economy in their consumption habit.

Category 2: Gender Independence

According to a survey by Reuters (2020), Thai women are more likely to do research online (27%) and to buy products online (29%) relative to men (21% and 18%, respectively). These findings might suggest women presently tend to take the initiative and probably have higher buying power than when society used to be male-dominant as in Vinish et al. (2020). By regional standards, Thai women, in the general population, are well educated, well paid, high achievers (Reuters, 2020). Thai women aged 15 or older have one of the highest employment rates (64%) in any economy worldwide (Reuters, 2020). Nancy, a golf coach, illustrated this point: “I never ask my husband for money. We split the bills for everything in the house including utilities and school for kids. But I sometimes take care of small random expenses without him being aware of it” (Nancy).

Previously it was found the effect of online consumer reviews on purchase intention was stronger for females than males (Bae & Lee, 2011; Vinish et al., 2020) and female consumers were more influenced by a negative review than men (Riquelme & Román, 2014). This is corroborated by Nancy who further revealed her autonomy in decision making with respect to sport product purchase:

When it comes to sport, I decide what I want to play and what equipment I need for that. Though my husband and I play sport together, I never consult him on my purchase. He has his taste in sport gear and I have mine. (Nancy)

Currently, female consumers are self-assured, progressive, and self-reliant, and they feel proud of earning a living on their own, as well as spending what they earn rightfully (Ozer & Cebeci, 2019). Consequently, female sport consumers in Thailand are more likely to be the primary decision makers in the household for items including sporting goods, as expressed by David, a horse-riding instructor:

Nora [his wife] acts as the head of the household procurement center and is responsible for obtaining household appliances including sporting gear for our family outing. She has my 100% support on all her decisions since I hate keeping track of things around the house. (David)

This study found that female consumers were empowered and emboldened to make a purchase decision for use in the household or for their own personal consumption (Bae & Lee, 2011; Ozer & Cebeci, 2019). This might be contrary to the concept of living in patriarchal society where there is a manifestation of male dominance (Keith, 2017). Therefore, it is posited:

Proposition 2: Women athletes are more likely to play a pivotal role in making decisions on acquisition of sport products in the household.

Category 3: Internet Reliance

Today's social media propels the growth of online shopping. Around 52% of purchases made by Thai sport consumers were aided by a modern electronic device (Kasikorn Research Center, 2020), and consumers reported conducting most of their research online through websites, social media, and other mobile applications (Terason et al., 2019). Sport consumers planned and made their purchase on the internet as expressed by a football coach, Patrick: "I couldn't imagine my life without the internet. I guess I would be lost. Seems like we manage our life and consume all sorts of things via various online channels. We even play sport on the internet" (Patrick).

Despite proximity to a physical store, some still use the Internet for the purpose. For example, Sheila, a martial arts instructor in an urban fitness club, emphasized her dependence on websites for her online shopping, as well as when she evaluated and compared various online deals, and seemed well-versed in recognizing the differential advantage of online marketplaces: "I make my choices on the internet, and I mean all the sport paraphernalia. I would research, then do comparing on product offerings on several websites before taking my pick (Sheila).

Athlete consumers shop online because a wide variety of products are made available there, especially when they have limited access to brick-and-mortar stores. In rural areas, sport consumers also make online purchases because of the convenience (Kasikorn Research Center, 2020). Rob, a football player from a provincial club, corroborated this point by asserting: "The club is so far from downtown, so I usually do my sport product shopping on the internet from the school office, and have it delivered. They do it surprisingly in 1–2 days despite the distant location" (Rob).

Consumer not only recognize the existence of e-shopping but also consider it useful, trustworthy, and enjoyable (Chiu & Won, 2016; Sproles & Kendall, 1986). Likewise, athlete consumers adopt online shopping as their preferred mode of sport goods consumption as Ha and Stoel (2009) proposed that one's perceptions of usefulness and personal experience influenced one's attitude toward e-shopping. Therefore, it is posited:

Proposition 3: Professional athlete consumers are likely to engage in e-commerce as a preferred mode of acquisition of sport products.

Category 4: Inquisitive Mind

Some economists argue that consumption of publicly visible goods is attributed to consumers' experimental attitude (Clingsmith & Sheremeta, 2018; Iyer et al., 2020; Thompson & Prendergast, 2015). In this study, some athlete participants have a penchant for trying new products to find out what effect they have. That is, professional athletes will even buy sport products on impulse when they notice the right product. Concerning this issue, Sam, a professional football player, remarked: "Normally I don't shop a whole lot, but when I find

something that triggers my whims, I wouldn't think twice the moment I see it. Probably it had to do with my being a low-maintenance guy" (Sam).

Some participants were just open to new product offerings, for example, Jane, a swimming coach, who are curious as reflected in her statement below: "I like to try new clothing brands a lot, esp. for swim wear. It makes me feel good to swim in a trendy suit. In a competition, a nifty-looking outfit surely helps boost your confidence" (Jane).

When unaware of the existing market offering, Adam, a boxing trainer, tended to turn to his circle of friends for the purpose of making a purchase decision as he noted: "I would ask my friends for tips when I plan to buy sport goods. I don't catch up with the latest trends and don't know what's going on, so I have to do extensive research" (Adam).

In this regard, our findings were in line with previous studies that confirmed a tendency in consumers to engage in experimenting with new products (Paden & Stell, 2005; Thompson & Prendergast, 2015). Therefore, it is posited:

Proposition 4: Professional athletes consumers tend to acquire sport products for trial purposes, especially on their first-time consumption.

Theme 2: Use

Category 1: Visibility Quest

As their incomes increased, Thai consumers, particularly higher-income shoppers, were spending more money on high-end sport products (Sangkawasi & Johri, 2017). In the process, sport consumers took delight in flaunting who they were and/or what they had (Clingsmith & Sheremeta, 2018). As was shown in a comment by Todd, a football athlete, on his Moncler running shoes made in the USA, it was apparent that, to some consumers, sport products were for use and display at the same time.

I wore them everywhere even when I am not running, to reveal my personality or let others see how trendy I am. I paid for them with my own money. I didn't ask for it from others, so there's no reason why I wouldn't want to show them off. (Todd)

David, a tennis instructor, shared his thought on the exercise equipment that he just acquired and revealed an inclination to display it:

Why don't you come to my home to experience by far the best treadmill around? It is a Landice. I bought this a month ago. I love everything on it — the track size, the incline, the cushion, the Bluetooth, and that control board. No other brands can beat this. (David)

In line with David, Cole, a football player, declared his intention to show his prized possession to peers: "Whenever I get new gear, I would bring it along to practice. They always get excited about my new gadget. And it feels good when people admire your new possession" (Cole).

Athletes on higher incomes, especially those who acquired high involvement products also tended to show them off in any capacity they like (Hedhli et al., 2016; Terason et al., 2019). Therefore, considering the above findings, it is posited:

Proposition 5: Professional athletes tend to use sport products in such a way that their consumption displays their wealth or social status.

Category 2: Brand Focus

Brands matter, and, in general, consumers tend to be brand loyal. Though, like other countries in Southeast Asia, consumers in Thailand are very price sensitive (Sangkhawasi & Johri, 2017), so they are ready to switch brands for even a slight reduction in price; however, sport products are not affected by pricing difference that much. Thai sport consumers are willing to pay more for many of their favorite brands. Thai consumers are the most brand conscious and brand loyal consumers in Southeast Asia (Sangkhawasi & Johri, 2017; Terason et al., 2019). In addition, they are loyal to brands in a variety of categories, from soaps and cosmetics to food, beer, and snacks. One particularly salient example can be seen when Nelly, a swimming coach, talks about how her consumption of sport goods changed when she was given a pay increase: “I have long been yearning for a Garmin smart watch, especially the Vivosport Limelight model. It is just gorgeous. I will definitely get one of those when they give me a bonus next month” (Nelly).

Marketers who recognize this fact can build and leverage brand equity to create strong consumer pull and loyalty (Joung & Park-Poaps, 2013). But at the same time, a brand must rank number one or two in a category to achieve strong loyalty. A young athlete participant, Nick, expressed his eagerness to pay for the best quality of sport products. He tried to save enough of his allowance to buy an item constituting a major expense: “When I go scuba diving, I would love to have an Aqua Lung Roller scuba diving bag for travel. It is the best diving bag in the world. I’m sure Mom wouldn’t mind me squandering my savings on it” (Nick).

Nick’s comment demonstrated that some people were more willing to spend on and to indulge themselves in prestige products perceived as being very high quality and thus warranting a higher price, consistent with Sangkhawasi and Johri (2017). The peer admiration seems to be the added value derived from the product. This behavior might have contributed to household debt in the country which Reuters (2020) reported to be \$431.47 billion, equal to 79.9% of gross domestic product.

Customers are brand conscious because brands enable them to communicate their social class and social status (Kumar et al., 2016). They feel by purchasing expensive and reputed brands, they become better performers than the others in their neighborhood and their social recognition gets amplified. Therefore, it is posited:

Proposition 6: Professional athletes tend to think about brand in their consumption because it shows their economic or social status.

Theme 3: Disposal

Category 1: Environmental Concern

The limited space in the household lead to product disposal. The disposal creates organization in the space and sanitation (Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2017), the qualities which accommodate a new purchase (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009). In case of sport products, Chalize, a professional golfer from Bangkok, observed:

There is already too much junk out there. I don’t want to add to it. Just look at a golf resort and see how nice and clean it is when you breathe while there. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. (Chalize)

A fellow participant, Janet, also a golfer, arduously substantiated this point when asked about how she feel about sport product disposal: “We need to save the world now. Enough with carbon emission. Enough with garbage disposal. I reuse, recycle all sorts of things, not just sport stuff. There should be zero waste” (Janet).

Particularly, a few studies suggested women consumers tended to advocate for product disposal and be the leading role player in this regard than men counterparts. women were more likely to donate or give away the disposed products (e.g., Cruz-Cárdenas & del Val Nunez, 2016; Fortuna & Diyamandoglu, 2017). Similarly, in the context of sport consumers, it is posited:

Proposition 7: Professional athlete consumers are likely to concerned about the environment in their disposal of sport products.

Category 2: Gifting Preference

Environmental attitudes lead people to discard less of their belongings outside the household (Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2017; Cruz-Cárdenas, & Arévalo-Chávez, 2017) and are associated with more environmentally friendly disposal behaviors, such as donating and giving away (Joung & Park-Poaps, 2013; Yee et al., 2016). A consumer will shed an item by using any of available methods such as storing, gifting, donating, dumping, or trading (Paden & Stell, 2005). This holds true for Nigel, a golfer by profession, asserting:

The money’s gonna go to charity? Why not, I’m sure to donate a few bucks, since it’s for a good cause. I would give away my used stuff, including sport gears. I would look at people close to me like my brother, relatives or close friends. I don’t want to reach people too far away, though. (Nigel)

Gifting can be directed towards impersonal entities, affiliated organizations, or personal acquaintances. For instance, Nina, a tennis athlete, corroborated Nigel’s attitude by maintaining: “When I have had enough of this bike, I would give it to my nephew as a gift and get a new one for myself. He then won’t have to buy one, but just get it handed down” (Nina).

Some studies (e.g., Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2017; Paden & Stell, 2005) found that the disposal by offering to family, friends, and acquaintances has become common. While some participants were prone to give away an unused product as a present, others tend to donate it for charity. For example, Bob, a boxer, revealed his predilection for such an undertaking: “The headgear, once I don’t need it, it goes to charity. It’s for a good cause. Probably kids at some poor schools will get to use it. I am sure they are in need and underfunded” (Bob).

It is obvious from the testimony above that sport consumers preferred to reduce waste by donating or giving the unwanted product items to others—consistent with Paden and Stell (2005). Therefore, it is posited:

Proposition 8: Professional athletes are inclined to discard their sport belongings by giving it as a present or donating.

Taking account of the findings above, I categorized the interview data into groups under three overarching themes. Table 1 presents a summary of the themes, categories, and codes derived from the data.

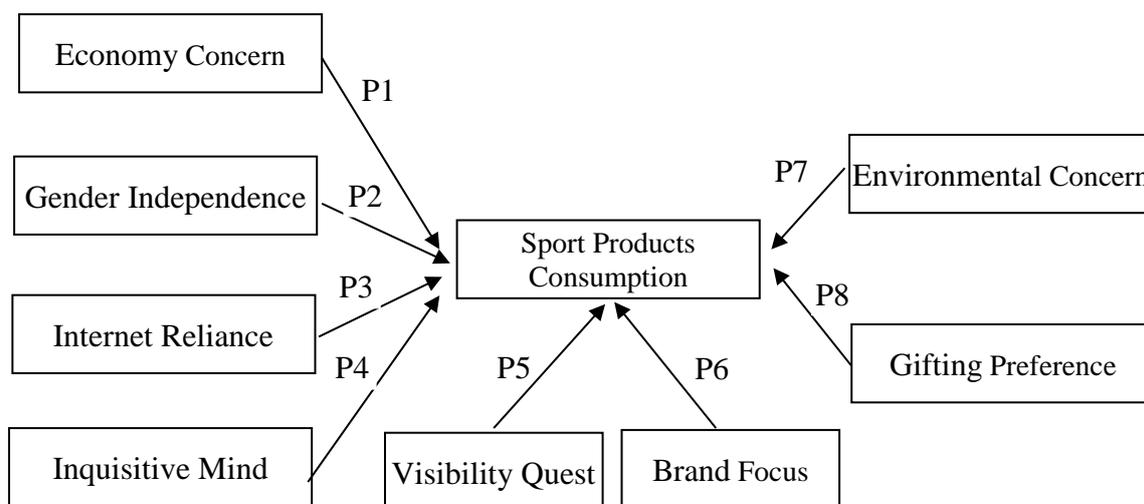
Table 1
Themes, Categories, and Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
Acquisition	Economy concern	Anticipating reasonable pricing and the best value for the money
	Gender independence	Female consumers enjoying independence in decision making
	Internet reliance	Engaging in habitual online purchase and reliance on the internet
	Inquisitive mind	Being open to trial and innovation
Use	Visibility quest	Craving to display and feeling gratified when admired
	Brand focus	Keeping up with the current trends
Disposal	Environmental concern	Advocating the protection of the environment and community safety
	Gifting preference	Seeking to promote the well-being of others

Discussion

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model summarizing the findings about the essential characteristics of sport consumption by professional athletes. The analysis yielded eight categories. Each category is accompanied by a proposition (P) that it is posited relative to the findings.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



The findings of the study contribute to the understandings of sport marketing discipline. Specifically, they provide an alternative method of exploring the subject of sport consumption that traditionally and predominantly was investigated using the quantitative approach. However, the results from the current study complemented those from previous studies using traditional methods.

Research Limitations

Some limitations of this study emerged in interpreting the findings. First, by using thematic analysis, there was a loss of continuity in the individual accounts where contradictions and discrepancies that may have been divulged were left out. Second, I decided to focus on areas of data and discourse that resonated with the experience of a sport consumer. In so doing, other themes which may have been equally important were overlooked. Some data excluded from the analysis involved their experience about the organizing of global sport events, the impact of the current pandemic, news about competitions or tournaments, etc.

The qualitative nature of the study posed some constraints in terms of generalizability, given that the data were gathered from a purposive sample of sport product consumers in Thailand. The scope of transferability is limited so it is not advisable to apply the findings to a different context (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Future research could seek to focus on specific homogenous groups classified by variables such as profession, level of education, athlete versus non-athlete status, and sport type.

Transferability is associated with the ways in which the reader determines whether and to what extent this phenomenon in this context can transfer to another context. It is the extent of applying the findings to other situations under similar conditions (Patton, 2014). Thus, I described the data in depth and with rich details to help the reader relate to some broader context (Shram, 2003). In this study, the results are not transferable to a different context from sport product marketing.

Implications for Future Research

Human consumption is relatively complex (Ha & Stoel, 2009) and is caused by several factors that were beyond the scope of the current study. Those elements (e.g., product diversity, brand equity, and other marketing variables) are known to influence an individual's consumption decision or choice but were not addressed here. Therefore, future research on sport consumer behavior should incorporate those elements which play critical roles in sport consumption.

Many factors are known to affect the relationship between consumers and sport products consumption (Chernev et al., 2011; Chiu, & Won, 2016). This study investigated the pattern of sport consumer behavior; however, future research can seek to confirm this study's findings by using a quantitative approach that might shed a different light on this targeted segment of consumers and help us to understand them through a different approach.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This research explored consumers in natural settings to understand how individuals exerted their personal resources on sport products consumption experience. This exploratory approach was appropriate because its findings have implications for the sport businesses relative to the provision of sport goods to Thai consumers. Sport marketers must have a good grasp on these environmental and behavioral forces so that they can plan a successful marketing strategy for a firm's sport products.

The findings shed light on how sport firms can map out a lucrative strategy in terms of penetrating highly promising niche markets (Fujak et al., 2018; e.g., sport athletes). In view of these trends, companies will also be able to determine innovative product lines, offer differentiated experiences for the sport consumer market, design a marketing strategy for different groups of sport consumers with unique types of behavior, and devise a channel strategy with an emphasis on the growing relevance of online shopping (Casper, 2007).

Today's sport consumers research more, expect more, and put more effort into obtaining sport products (Mudrick et al., 2019). Therefore, it is critical to take the pulse of the consumers and the first step is always to know who they are and what they expect, as well as how to deliver the product to them in the most cost-efficient and time-efficient manner.

This study explored the nature of sport consumption behavior by analyzing and categorizing interview data regarding sport products consumption by professional athletes in Thailand. I discovered three themes in which revealed eight relevant categories. In turn, eight corresponding propositions were presented to refer to this phenomenon.

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