

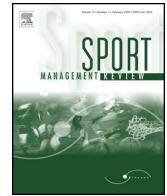


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Extending sport-based entrepreneurship theory through phenomenological inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a process perspective on sport entrepreneurship in the fitness industry, utilizing phenomenological inquiry into the entrepreneurial lives of eleven fitness entrepreneurs. The purpose of this paper is to reveal how fitness entrepreneurs strategize and pursue competitive advantage in a non-traditional industry. Our findings show that while fitness entrepreneurs share many similarities with non-sport entrepreneurs, fitness entrepreneurs are affected by a variety of factors attributable to working in a non-conventional industry. The present study contributes to the emerging theoretical discussions surrounding the concept of sport entrepreneurship and highlights the value of process perspectives when examining entrepreneurial activities. No empirical studies thus far exist that seek to illuminate the exact nature of individual sport entrepreneurship. This study is a first step in developing testable hypotheses and to contrast sport entrepreneurship to non-sport entrepreneurship. Additionally, our research provides fitness entrepreneurs in the industry with information on what they may face when pursuing their own business objectives. Finally, sport management and entrepreneurship curricula can be enhanced based on information gathered in this study.

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1. Introduction

Sport-based entrepreneurship has emerged in recent years as a promising conceptual joint venture between entrepreneurship and sport management research. Generally understood as “the mindset of people or organizations actively engaged in the pursuit of new opportunities in the sports-context” (Ratten, 2012b, p. 66), sport entrepreneurship combines considerations for the economic, socio-political, and entrepreneurial facets of the sport industry. Ratten (2011b), for example, suggested seven sport-based entrepreneurship categories: community-based, corporate, immigrant, institutional, international, social, and technological. However, while theoretical connections between the two research disciplines appear promising, empirical work is “at an initial stage” (Ratten, 2012b, p. 76). Furthermore, the “sport” side of sport-based entrepreneurship has itself been conceptualized in a limited manner, focusing predominantly on entrepreneurial activities of internationally operating sport organizations and administrators at the helm of sport

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teams (e.g., [Legg & Gough, 2012](#)). Because of the paucity of work in this area, various questions remain: Who exactly are sport entrepreneurs? How do they engage in entrepreneurial activities? Are sport entrepreneurs similar to or different from non-sport entrepreneurs?

The purpose of this paper is therefore threefold. First, it extends the presently available conceptual reflections on the nexus of sport and entrepreneurship through an empirical examination of the lived entrepreneurial experience of personal trainers and fitness facility owners. Specifically, this study investigates how fitness entrepreneurs such as personal trainers and small gym owners remain successful in an industry characterized by an almost infinite supply of alternatives for consumers, extreme low entry barriers, and almost non-existent regulation.

Second, this paper extends the sportive aspect of sport-based entrepreneurship to include self-employed individuals who enact their entrepreneurial roles as innovators, venture creators, and social facilitators, albeit not as members of larger organizations. As such, we heed [Ratten's \(2012a\)](#) call for additional studies that examine sport entrepreneurship in different sport sectors and economies.

Third, acknowledging [Ball's \(2005\)](#) assertion that “the key to understanding entrepreneurship is to understand the entrepreneur” (p. 5), this paper extends sport-based entrepreneurship theory by shifting the analytical lens toward an appreciation of the dynamic and unique character of sport-based entrepreneurial activities ([Ratten, 2012a](#)) and the distinct nature of the sport industry ([Chalip, 2006](#); [Smith & Stewart, 2010](#)).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we describe entrepreneurial activity in the fitness industry. In the methods section, we outline how a constructivist approach guided by practice theory and phenomenological inquiry can enhance our understanding of sport entrepreneurship. In the results section, we highlight four salient themes or categories that dominated the participants' narratives. Finally, we conclude by discussing our findings and by highlighting potential areas of future research.

2. The fitness industry

“Fitness industry” is a monolithic term used to describe a sector in the sport industry that comprises such disparate businesses as chain health clubs, supplement companies, personal trainers, clothing and shoe manufacturers, MMA gyms, CrossFit gyms, niche gyms, magazine and internet media, and equipment manufacturers. It also includes fitness expos like the Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio, which in 2015 drew over 175,000 visitors from across the globe to watch more than 18,000 participants compete in 50 sports and events ([Kurtzmann, 2015](#)). This study focuses on the most readily recognized aspect of the fitness industry—the process of training, which occurs both in large chain gyms and, increasingly, in smaller niche gyms owned and operated by a single individuals.

Between 1997 and 2011, revenue of fitness and recreational sport centers increased from around \$10 billion to over \$21 billion ([IHRSA, 2012](#); [United States Census Bureau, 2007](#)), and the industry today provides employment to almost 600,000 Americans ([IBISWorld, 2014](#)). In 2014, almost 55 million individuals were members of fitness and health clubs and the industry is expected to top \$30 billion in revenue by 2019 ([IBISWorld, 2014](#)). Sport management scholars have increasingly been paying attention to the managerial challenges found in the fitness industry, particularly as they pertain to running large chain gyms (e.g., [Covell & Walker, 2013](#); [Huset-McGuire, Trail, & Anderson, 2003](#); [MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005, 2007](#); [MacIntosh & Walker, 2012](#); [Maguire, 2001](#); [Papadimitriou & Karteliotis, 2000](#)). However, to date, there have been no attempts to analyze this sector of the sport industry through the lens of sport-based entrepreneurship, despite the fact that entrepreneurial activities and small businesses constitute the main drivers of growth and value creation in this particular portion of the sport industry; in 2013, the five largest (measured by revenue) health club companies combined operated less than 5% of the over 34,000 clubs in the US ([Club Industry, 2013](#)).

The result is a highly fragmented industry in which small gyms and entrepreneurs have been able to successfully capture a significant share of the market and to resist the consolidation efforts of larger chains. As [Ball \(2005\)](#) observed, entrepreneurship can be “a driver of change, innovation, and employment” (p. 5) in this industry, and small businesses allow many to follow their personal and professional dreams ([Martin & Palakshappa, 2003](#)).

Personal trainers, gym owners, and fitness staff also mediate member experiences of the health and fitness service firms they represent. For instance, previous literature demonstrates that, as aesthetic laborers, personal trainers personify their employer's brand through their actions, their look, and their comportment ([Harvey, Vachhani, & Williams, 2014](#)). Trainers and fitness staff also provide a link between gym goers and the fitness industry ([De Lyon & Cushion, 2013](#); [Maguire, 2001](#)), and front desk staff, personal trainers, and membership service employees all affect the climate at fitness centers, which subsequently impacts the overall experience for members ([Brown & Fry, 2011](#)).

In sum, fitness entrepreneurs exemplify many of the distinct features attributed to the sport industry in general and sport entrepreneurs in particular. Thus, further research that examines the finer details of how these individuals assume and enact their roles as entrepreneurs is not only warranted but also well suited to advance current conceptual discussions in the burgeoning field of sport-based entrepreneurship research.

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