A Mixed Method Approach to Understanding the Progressive Constraints of the Social Worlds within Indoor Climbing Gyms

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Facilities/Events - Other (Amateur Sport) virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Facilities/Events
Abstract 2020-022

Traditionally an outdoor sport, rock climbing has increasingly moved indoors through the construction of modern climbing gyms with 2018 marking record industry growth (Climbing Business Journal, 2018). Various programs, events, and the climbers themselves have been found to create robust social networks within the gyms (Kulczycki, 2014). Still, much is unknown about how individuals manage constraints progressively from sport initiation to maturity via indoor climbing gyms and within sport generally. The notion that actors, organizations, events, and practices create domains of interest and involvement for a participant around an activity is conceptualized as social worlds (Unruh, 1980; Strauss, 1978). Progression in social worlds is depicted as four concentric circles where participants progress from a naïve outsider to a dedicated and committed insider (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this project was to explore the process of how individuals become progressively immersed into the social worlds of indoor climbing gyms and negotiated constraints along their participation trajectory.

A mixed-method sequential explanatory design was used to gain broad insight and rich depth of understanding (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). First, quantitative data was collected through an online survey and then analysed. Second, follow-up qualitative data was collected through individual in-depth interviews. Questionnaire items measured leisure constraints (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997, Gilbert & Hudson, 2000), climbing behaviour (e.g., skill level, climbing types), and social worlds progression (Gawiler & Havitz, 1998). The survey was distributed electronically through indoor rock climbing gyms in Australia and Canada (N = 1,604). Interviews were completed with a purposefully selected sample of survey respondents ensuring a range of social world types and climbing backgrounds (N = 26).

The sample was comprised of outsiders (13.4%), occasionals (44.6%), regulars (25.4%), and insiders (16.6%). Quantitative results revealed a differential pattern of constraints based on social world immersion via MANOVA (Pillai’s Trace =.282, F (24, 3957) = 17.13, p < .001). All nine constraint factors were revealed to differ based on social world type (p < .001), including individual/psychological, lack of knowledge, lack of interest, lack of partners, norms, facilities/services, accessibility/financial, and time. Post hoc testing further revealed that reported constraints progressively declined as immersion in social worlds increased.

Qualitative data analysis enhanced understanding of the quantitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2018) through analysis consistent with previous rock climbing research which applied an interpretive methodology (e.g., Kulczycki & Hinch, 2015). Three categories of constraints were highlighted within the qualitative data: facility focused (e.g., expensive, routes, crowding), personal (e.g., disinterest, time), and social groups. The gym was attractive due to accessibility, route variety, social community, and training areas. Further, the gym assisted participants in negotiating constraints through membership benefits, changing climbing space and times, social bonding groups (e.g., social media), and managing priorities.

The combined results clearly explain that constraints are indeed progressive based on immersion in the social worlds, providing implications for both theory and practice. As individuals develop in the activity and grow their social networks, they develop the adequate resources to better manage and overcome the related constraints.