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Creating sport consumers in Dutch sport policy

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This article deals with the tension between the association logic and the market logic that appears in the domain of voluntary sport clubs (VSCs). We present a qualitative analysis of sport policy texts of fifteen Dutch national sport organizations (NSOs) and the national umbrella organization to examine how they discursively construct the market logic with respect to their policies towards VSCs. In this article, we argue that although there is no empirical evidence for an increasing consumerist attitude among Dutch sport participants, the policy makers of Dutch NSOs nevertheless pressure VSCs to modernize their activities according to a consumer logic that contrasts with their traditional values. We found that their policy texts construct a consumerist discourse by (1) identifying societal changes that are closely linked to consumerism as a possible threat for the future development of sport clubs and by (2) presenting the emergence of the consumer as a window of opportunity if sport clubs succeed in treating their members as such. We discuss the implications of portraying members of VSCs as consumers and conclude with a research agenda.

Keywords: consumerism; membership; qualitative research; sport policy; voluntary sport clubs

Introduction

Sport in the Netherlands is, like in many countries, organized in voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) that follow an 'association logic' (Ibsen and Seippel 2010). According to Ibsen and Seippel (2010, p. 605), an association logic can be seen as an orientation towards ideals and sporting objectives by members of a club that is democratic and is run by volunteers. This association logic can be seen as a defining element of the way sport clubs are organized. However, the association logic seems to be under pressure in civil associations worldwide, and numerous authors have expressed their worries about this trend (e.g. Putnam 2000, Skocpol 2003). One of the most important threats for the association logic is the emergence of a 'market logic' or 'consumer logic', a view in which members of voluntary associations behave as 'customers' or 'consumers' of the organization (cf. Enjolras 2002, Seippel 2002, Lorentzen and Hustinx 2007, Pilgaard 2012). The increasing customer behaviour that scholars and policy makers ascribe to members of voluntary associations is predominantly based on a number of societal developments like individualization and informalization (Lorentzen and Hustinx 2007). According to Meijs and Ten Hoorn (2008), this idea is widely spread in the Dutch sport sector, and Ibsen and Seippel consider the shift of identifying members as consumers to be part of a 'market logic' that gradually replaces the association logic in sports.

The implications of departing from the association logic could be far-reaching. The character of VSCs is largely drawn on the elements Ibsen and Seippel (2010) identified:

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democracy, volunteering, ideals and sporting objectives. A shift from these values of mutual solidarity towards a consumer-centred market logic could endanger the foundations of the way VSCs function (cf. Enjolras 2002, p. 373).

The purpose of this article is to argue that Dutch national sport organizations (NSOs) pressure VSCs to modernize their activities according to a consumer logic that stands in contrast to their traditional values, although no empirical evidence for an increasing consumerist attitude among Dutch sport participants is presented. We base our argument on an analysis of sport policy texts of these NSOs. By demonstrating how this argument is established, we contribute to the debate on the tensions between the association logic and the consumer logic.

The consumerist discourse: *choice* and *voice*

Before we consider how a consumerist discourse is constructed in Dutch sport policy texts, we will identify how the emergence of 'consumerism' has developed in public-services policy. We do this because it is relevant to see how such a discourse resides in a sector that traditionally is organized around collective values such as solidarity and equality (cf. Needham 2003, Clarke *et al.* 2007). From the beginning of the twentieth century, consumerism has predominantly been used to describe 'the expansion of capitalist commodity production, which has given rise to a vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption' (Featherstone 2007, p. 13). Alongside the growing importance of material culture, Sassatelli (2007, p. 1) notes a variety of discourses and institutions that define this context as a 'consumer culture' in which people are addressed as consumers. This might not be surprising, as consumerism has proved to be a 'compelling story' (Vidler and Clarke 2005, p. 19).

Researchers on public services, particularly from Britain, have paid attention to the growing salience of the consumerist discourse among politicians and policy makers. The interest of Thatcherite (1979–1990) and New Labour (1997–2010) governments in connecting citizenship to consumerism led British scholars to consider the pivotal role of the consumer in public services. The first notion of connecting the figure of the consumer to that of the citizen can be traced back to the 1980s, although some scholars point to earlier accounts of public-service consumerism (see Kroen 2004, Trentmann 2006). In the 1980s, neo-liberalist governments in European welfare states introduced choice and voice to individuals in the provision of public services (PERRI 6 2003, Gabriel and Lang 2006, Needham 2006, Jung 2010, Powell *et al.* 2010). From then onwards, the consumer gained importance in the public debate in the UK as well as in other parts of Europe and the US (Vidler and Clarke 2005, Clarke *et al.* 2007). According to Vidler and Clarke (2005, p. 20), it is appropriate to see the increased importance of the consumer in policies as a discourse, because consumerism is put as a 'generic organizing principle for a public-service reform. In doing so, policy makers have joined up large historical, social, cultural and political themes in ways that both demonstrate the need for the public-service reform, and tell a story about why the consumer is the archetypal 'modern' figure.

The ability to choose is an important part of the consumerist discourse. Choice in the way services are provided should, in the consumerist discourse, be left to the consumer. An often-cited speech by the former UK Secretary of State for Health Alan Milburn (2002) claims that 'we live in a consumer society. People demand services tailor-made to their individual needs. Ours is the informed and enquiring society. People expect choice and demand quality'. It is exactly this notion that is at the heart of the way neo-liberal governments in European welfare states have constructed a consumerist discourse (see

Clarke *et al.* 2007, pp. 15–16). These governments have reacted on societal developments by anticipating and promoting consumerist attitudes in their policies. The use of the concept of consumption in public services is closely related to 'watchwords of choice, individualization and personalization' (Powell *et al.* 2010, p. 324). The introduction of choice in public service has helped providers to service the individual in a better way, but can also cause organizational problems in public-service organizations. The consumerist discourse starts from the conception of informed and proactive users; however, not all users might have the required skills and knowledge that enables and empowers them to make the choices that are offered (Clarke *et al.* 2007, p. 107).

The concept of voice refers to the emergence of the critical consumer, who challenges authorities and organizations if he or she does not agree with the way services are provided (Hirschman 1970). Voice is recognized in the consumerist discourse as opportunity for members or customers to advocate their needs to the organization, but Hirschman notes that voice can be viewed in two ways. Voice can be used either as an alternative to exit strategies in organizations. By providing feedback to the organization, the members can help the organization to become more effective in its practices. However, voice can also be used as residual to exit strategies, which is more problematic for the organization. According to Hirschman (1970) 'the discontented customers or members could become so harassing that their protests would at some point hinder rather than help whatever efforts at recovery are undertaken' (p. 31).

A consumerist discourse in sport policy?

So far, we have identified characteristics that can be distinguished in the consumerist discourse in political and governmental notions of public-service reform. In these reform attempts, civil society organizations have taken a more prominent place in the delivery of services to citizens, and governments have ensured that the delivery of these services became more market-driven (Carmel and Harlock 2008). While marketization and commercialization of civil society organizations have been topics of interest in the earlier research (e.g. Salamon 1999, Enjolras 2002, Dart 2004, Eikenberry and Kluver 2004, Toepler 2004, Weisbrod 2004, Williams 2004, Nickel and Eikenberry 2009), the consumerist discourse is underexposed in research on civil society organizations. Kendall (2009) is among the first to identify a consumerist-based approach in governmental pressures to modernize the voluntary sector. It is, however, unknown whether the voluntary sector itself postulates a more consumerist approach in the same way as governments have done in public services. In the remainder of this section, we will evaluate how the translation of 'choice' and 'voice' to the voluntary sport sector can construct a consumerist discourse.

In order to make the distinction between commercialization on the one hand and consumerism on the other, it is important to understand the mutual relationship of the member and the organization in these discourses. Within the discourse of commercialization, the role of the member remains largely unchanged while the organization changes. Within the commercialization discourse, nonprofit and voluntary organizations pursue commercial activities to generate resources (Toepler 2004). However, as is illustrated by Enjolras' (2002) article on the commercialization of VSCs in Norway, these activities do not change the character of the core activities of the organization. The different types of commercialization that he distinguishes are 'revenues from competitions, revenues derived from renting (hiring) infrastructure facilities, revenues from ancillary activities and revenues from sponsors' (p. 362).

By contrast, the consumerist discourse is concerned with a change in the way sport participants experience their activities in a VSC. Bodet (2009) argues that all sport participants should be treated as sport consumers who operate in a system of supply and demand. In this view, the activities organized by VSCs are characterized as services that are distributed by an organization to a user. This conceptualization marks an important change because VSCs are no longer seen as the sum of activities deployed by its members, but as providers that supply sport activities to its customers.

The concept of 'choice', then, treats the consumer as individual that is only loosely connected to an organization. The voluntary sport sector traditionally is organized with commitment as a principle, but the increased possibilities for choice that are embraced within the consumerist discourse could, in this respect, function as a fruitful base to provide tailor-made solutions that can satisfy particular needs of individuals (cf. Clarke *et al.* 2007). In their sport activities, users would pay directly for a service (Needham 2006), instead of having a membership in a VSC. For example, an athletics club could charge people for a running course instead of offering them a membership in the club.

The concept of 'voice' deals with the say users have in the way their activities are provided to them 'by means of representative bodies, complaints mechanisms and surveys of individual preferences and views' (Public Administration Select Committee 2005, p. 5). In itself, voice is a natural concept for VSCs. After all, VSCs are democratic organizations in which people can actively discuss the organization's issues with key persons and use their democratic voting rights. However, if a more business-like conception of 'voice' emerges in VSCs, this would be likely to replace the democratic decision structure into individual complaint structures. Horch (1998, p. 50) identifies this trend as 'turning members into customers', which results in a self-destroying process. He argues that by introducing these structures, VSCs lose their particularities that made them successful.

Adams (2011) argues that these self-destroying processes can also be found in sport policy. In his article on modernization in the voluntary sport sector, Adams finds that modernization processes lead to unresolved tensions with respect to the mutual support character of VSCs. He argues that neo-liberalist pressures to modernize VSCs have changed clubs not only in their functions, but also in their reasons to function. The increased attention given to choice and voice in the provision of sport activities could well be compared to the modernization processes that Adams has outlined. However, we lack an understanding of the way NSOs construct discourses of consumerism in their policies towards VSCs. We would like to stress the importance of such an analysis, because the use of a consumerist discourse in sport policy could be troublesome for a number of reasons that will be discussed in the next section.

Is consumerism problematic?

Already in the late 1980s, Pollitt (1988, p. 122) noted that the 'linking of consumerism with citizenship prompts a further question as to what kind of values might drive a distinctively public-service model of consumerism'. The same question can be asked for the introduction of the consumerist discourse in sport policy. As opposed to citizens or (sport) club members, Gabriel and Lang (2006, p. 174) note, consumers 'need not to be members of a community, nor do they have to act on its behalf. Consumers operate in impersonal markets, where they can make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations'. The field of VSCs is therefore an intriguing case to study consumerism.

The Dutch voluntary sector has been acknowledged to be well-organized, and its relative size has proven to be among the biggest in the world (see Salamon and

Sokolowski 2004, Dekker and De Hart 2009). The voluntary sport sector accounts for the largest part of the total Dutch voluntary sector (SCP 2010), which makes it of high interest for Dutch society. Almost one third of the Dutch population was a member of a VSC in 2007, while 10% regularly volunteered for a sport organization (SCP 2010).

Clarke *et al.* (2007) found that linking consumerism to citizenship is problematic, but the links between membership and consumerism might be associated with even larger contradictions. Because most VSCs operate as face-to-face, mutual support organizations, the social relations between their members are quite the opposite from impersonal. Social obligations and expectations are key to the way VSCs are organized, and they seem to contrast with a consumerist attitude. Kendall (2009, p. 14) contends that linking voluntary organizations' activities to a more consumerist approach 'has tended to favour consumer choice over citizenship-related activities, implicitly bracketing the intrinsic or existential significance of voluntarism as a quantitatively different way of forming social relations'.

The obligations and responsibilities that stem from membership in a VSC are evident when the formal decision making structures are considered. Other than in public service consumerism, members of VSCs have the responsibility to govern their own activities. Although the extent to which people participated in decision-making in the past should not be overestimated, the consumerist discourse could have profound consequences for members of clubs. In some cases the introduction of flexible membership forms takes away people's right and it might decrease the willingness to participate in the democratic structure of clubs.

Methods

To research how policy makers of NSOs deal with the tension between sport participants as consumers and as members in the context of VSCs, strategic policy plans of the national umbrella organization and the fifteen biggest NSOs[1] in the Netherlands were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Bryman 2012, p. 557). In total, the 15 federations accounted for over 3.8 million memberships, out of an overall number of almost 5.2 million officially registered club members and a total of 16.6 million inhabitants in the Netherlands. Almost all documents were obtained by downloading them from the organization's websites. One policy plan was sent to the first author after a phoned request. For all organizations, the most recent policy plan was selected, and if available the second most recent document was also included. The policy plan that was formulated by NOC*NSF, the national umbrella organization, is deemed to represent all NSOs and was accepted as guide for the period between 2012 and 2016 at the General Assembly of sport federations on 24 January 2012. In total, twenty-four documents with a total of 1018 pages were collected.

After gathering the documents, sections on sport for all and sections on VSCs were selected for analysis. Most policy texts hold strong divisions between elite sport sections and sport for all sections. Sections on sport for all tend to predominantly focus on the individual sport participants and on sport organizations. After this selection procedure, texts were transferred to NVivo 9, after which (partly) open coding and axial coding took place (Boeije 2010).

Coding

The open coding process retrieved a total number of eight main codes. In the coding process, we sought to answer the following question: what signs of a consumerist discourse are constructed in the policy texts? Answering this question, any topic that

could be related to a consumerist discourse as found in the literature review was coded in an open way. The eight topics that were constructed were: 'flexibilization', 'growth of the VSC', 'marketization', 'professionalization', 'shortcomings of the VSC', 'societal changes', 'sport participants central' and 'supplier–customer relationship'. After this first phase of coding took place, the text was axial-coded. In this process, quotes from the first phase were being restructured in order to indicate differences and similarities between codes (Boeije 2010). The coding process eventually yielded three main themes, which will be discussed in the results section, illustrated by quotes from the policy texts. The quotes used in this article were translated from Dutch by the first author.

Results

Although the performed analysis is qualitative in nature, it is appropriate to give an indication of the range of policy texts that to some extent hold the characteristics of a consumerist discourse. In total, 13 of the 16 policy texts contained words and phrases that construct such a discourse. In the coding process, three overarching themes were found. First, policy makers emphasize a number of societal changes that are closely linked to images of consumerism and are presented as possible threats for the future development of VSCs. Second, policy makers identify opportunities for VSCs if they succeed in treating their members as consumers. Third, policy makers present policy measures to modernize VSCs in order to enhance their attractiveness for the modern sport consumer. We will argue here that with these three themes, a coherent story of the consumer in the Dutch voluntary sport sector has emerged. Because of the mix of an alarming sound on the one hand and an attractive alternative on the other, the policy texts invite VSCs to change their practices. However, our analysis will also show that in these policy texts, little empirical evidence is brought up, resulting in a rather rhetorical argument in favour of the member as consumer.

By demonstrating how the consumer has become an important figure in the analysed policy texts, we demonstrate that policy makers have constructed a coherent narrative, or as Vidler and Clarke (2005) argue, a consumerist discourse. In our analysis, we focus on the way this discourse is constructed. However, we deem the context in which NSOs operate to be an important issue to consider. A number of researchers have already discussed tensions between the aims of NSOs and VSCs and the context that these organizations operate in (cf. Garrett 2003, Harris *et al.* 2009).

Societal changes

As was found earlier, the Dutch voluntary sport sector is relatively well organized, and it is characterized by high degrees of participation and volunteering. However, in the policy texts, it is put forward that the voluntary sport sector has become under pressure, due to broader societal changes. Observations like the one presented here, by the Bridge Federation, can be found in a broad range of documents, with half of the documents explicitly stating that VSCs deal with 'individualization'.

> Society is rapidly changing. Postal services have almost entirely disappeared. Transport is more and more a head of expense. Time and space are scarce. The Dutch are ageing, and we grow older in good health. A life without a computer is almost impossible. Flat screen televisions and smartphones have become standards over a short period of time. Online

> shopping is increasing. Wellness and fitness seem to be individualized alternatives for the VSCs. These are all facts to keep in mind. (Nederlandse Bridge Bond 2012)

The changes that are described in the policy texts are reflections on wider societal changes, not just changes in the way sports are practised. The transition of a traditional society into a modern society and the establishment of modern institutions can also be observed in public-service consumerism. Although different, sometimes contradictory, versions of modernity can often be observed, discourses around consumer culture often hint at some variation of modernity (Edwards 2000, Clarke 2005, Clarke *et al.* 2007). The notions of modernity and individualization are embedded in a larger debate that connects affluence and informatization of society to increasing individualization. At the same time, an increasing relevance is ascribed to the informalization of relationships between people.

> On the one hand, individuals become independent and demands are preconceived: 'what's in it for me' (individualisation). One the other hand, there is a need for collective experiences, but with an ad hoc and informal character (informalisation). (Koninklijke Nederlandsche Schaatsenrijders Bond 2011)

Individualization is seen as a threat to participation in VSCs. Both the participation of people in sport as well as volunteering in VSCs is, according to the policy plans, under pressure because of these developments. In these plans, policy makers present a discourse that premises that people are expected to behave in a more selfish way and that individualization leads to sport participation outside traditionally organized clubs.

> Because of individualisation and self-interest, the support for the Bridge Federation is crumbling away and associational life is threatened. (Nederlandse Bridge Bond 2012)

Here, the policy plan of the Bridge Federation echoes a similar perspective as was identified in the previous quote by the Skating Federation. Individualization and self-interest seem to be large threats to VSCs. According to the Equestrian Federation, increased choice between opportunities based on the interest of sportsmen have changed the position of voluntary clubs as the *natural* organization for sport participation to take place.

> The facilities and the supply of sport are increasingly important for sportsmen in their choices and their behaviour. Participants in sport do not automatically pick the VSC as a sport organisation. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Hippische Sportfederatie 2011)

However, a decreased interest in membership in VSCs is not the only threat that is brought to the fore in the analysed policy texts. Many NSOs believe that these developments occur outside as well as inside their own membership base. According to the NSOs, participants that do choose the voluntary club as a 'locus' of their sport participation also have different motives to participate in these organizations. Therefore, they observe the individualistic attitude not only as an external, but also as an internal threat.

> Individualisation is a trend that not only occurs with potential members, but also with those people that already affiliated in a tennis club and the tennis federation. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Lawn Tennis Bond 2008)

Individualization, informatization and informalization are explicitly presented as 'facts', as can be seen in the first quote from the Bridge Federation. These facts are presented as the outcomes of solid sociological analyses that can hardly be ignored in constructing the policy. Here, it is where the consumer first enters as a figure that might be asking for a different method of sport participation. In this respect, the sport participant as consumer acts as a link between societal changes and the modernization of VSCs.

The earlier mentioned observation by Powell *et al.* (2010) illustrated that keywords as individualization, choice and personalization can be found in policies that reside around a consumerist discourse. We also found many policy documents explicitly stating that sport policy should be organized around the consumer, with many NSOs mentioning the terms consumer, customer or consumerism. In these texts, sport participants are not just found behaving individually; they are expected to behave as consumers who buy sport products in a market of sport providers. In total, 13 of the 16 researched organizations use the word consumer or customer in some way to describe the relationship with their members.

> (Winter) sport is subject to change because of trends in society and consumers that act upon these trends. Consumers are increasingly looking for experiences, variation and adventure in their sport. (Nederlandse Ski Vereniging 2010)

> Sport participants are increasingly changing from participating club members into consuming customers. This calls for a different approach. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Lawn Tennis Bond 2008)

Having introduced the emergence of the consumer as outcome of many societal changes, the NSOs immediately assess this development in terms of its consequences. This means that the sport consumer is mainly seen as a threat for VSCs. As was stated in one of the citations by the Bridge Federation, NSOs see the interest in clubs crumbling away.

> Because members commit themselves in a less durable way and increasingly behave like customers (they pay a price for a sport service without doing any volunteering), long-term commitment of volunteers has become less self-evident. (Koninklijke Nederlandsche Schaatsenrijders Bond 2011)

Departing from the assumption that VSC members are increasingly behaving as consumers, most NSOs directly shift to the question how these consumers should be served in order to retain their memberships. In this shift, the existence of the consumer is taken for granted. No single NSO shows any empirical data of their members actually becoming more 'consumerist' and many NSOs do not seem to have the means nor the desire to investigate whether there is indeed a changing attitude among members and potential members of VSCs. Nevertheless, they do postulate the existence of members as consumers as starting point of their policy plans.

This line of reasoning serves a rhetorical purpose: first, the transition of a changing society is presented as an inevitable development. Second, the rise of the consumer is seen as a threatening development for the future of VSCs. By constructing this twofold argument, NSOs create room for themselves to suggest organizational changes. In the next section, we will show how they make the consumer a central figure in their policies.

The suggested measures in these policy plans are likely to have profound consequences for the way sport and VSCs are organized. It raises the question whether the policy plans are built on nothing more than a belief that people develop consumerist attitudes towards VSCs. But it also raises the question why the discourse on consumerism

is embraced in an environment that traditionally had been organized around access for all and community building (Horne 2006, p. 101). After all, VSCs are a somewhat unnatural environment for consumers to be associated with.

Making the consumer central

The construction of the member-consumer is central in the societal changes that policy makers observe in their analyses of changes in society. A striking finding in our analysis is the fact that consumerism, contrary to individualism, is not only seen as a threat to VSCs. Paradoxically, the rise of the consumer is also seen as an opportunity to strengthen VSCs and to obtain growth in the number of sport participants, which is one of the main goals of the Dutch national sport federation (NOC*NSF). In the policy texts, it is suggested that if NSOs capitalize on the needs of consumers, they have chances to realize these goals. This is illustrated in the following quote by the national umbrella organization in which the notion of sport participants functioning in a system of supply and demand (cf. Bodet 2009) is introduced.

> Strengthening the market share will follow from quantitative and qualitative growth. A better link between sport supply and the demands and needs of different sport participants will lead to an increase in club member. (NOC*NSF 2007)

In order to reach these goals, the policies identify a role for clubs to serve the customer in a better way. Under the cloak of the term 'the sport participant central' (e.g. Koninklijke Nederlandse Hippische Sportfederatie 2011, NOC*NSF 2012), almost every single NSO urges their affiliated VSCs to adapt to the 'needs' of the consuming member.

> The VSC is under pressure because of societal developments like consumerism and individualization. People join clubs because of more diverse motives. There is an increasing demand for diversity. VSCs have to develop themselves in this direction. Other ways of getting people to participate in sport and other forms of committing people to the club are needed. (NOC*NSF 2012)

It is remarkable to see that the notion of the demanding sport consumers is not just seen as a threat, but also as an opportunity. Apart from the struggles that an emerging consumerist attitude seems to cause, a more refined and positive view of the consumer is used as a stimulus to change VSCs into more diverse sport environments.

> Our goal still is to enable sport participants to practice their sport in a way and on a moment that fits their wishes and needs (NOC*NSF 2007)

In this citation, the notion of sport participants significantly differs from the previous accounts of a selfish and individualized consumer. Still, the sport participant is seen as someone who wants to practise sport in his own way, but in this quote this is seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. The Dutch Sports Federation (NOC*NSF), the umbrella organization that sets the agenda with its policy documents, has instigated this view, which is copied by the NSOs in their policy plans (cf. Van 't Verlaat 2010). This gives the consumerist discourse a dualistic character. On the one hand, consumerism is observed as a threat for VSCs, while on the other hand NSOs try to reform the VSCs by making the consumer a central element in their policy plans. The Bridge Federation, for example, observed a declining support and a diminishing interest in associational life because of

individualization and self-interest. However, they think that a more central role for the self-interest of participants can turn this trend around.

> Competitions should be brought to the attention and, if possible, be attuned to the demands. A more 'marketised' approach is needed to bend the tendency towards the declining interest. (Nederlandse Bridge Bond 2012)

This dualistic view of the sport consumer as a threat and an opportunity has profound consequences for the way membership in sport organizations is viewed. Within the consumerist discourse that is constructed in the policies, it is doubted whether the VSCs can still fulfil the needs of member-consumers. This is striking, because in the past clubs were seen as 'natural' environments in which members could produce their own sport. However, within the consumerist discourse, clubs are seen as autonomous entities that should serve participants.

> Sport consumers are willing to pay extra for sport accommodations if they match their demands. Clubs do not have a fitting answer to this yet. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Hippische Sportfederatie 2011)

In this citation, the demands of sport consumers are placed against the ability of clubs to fit these demands. Here, a process of autonomization of the VSC as described by Horch (1998, p. 49) can be observed. Because of processes of consumerism, the activities in VSCs have to fulfil the expectancies of its members by becoming 'selective, secure and equivalent'. This results in oligarchic tendencies within the VSC; because members are expected to behave as consumers they are excluded from decision-making *ex ante*. This does lead to questions as to who can still be seen as a member of the club. Apparently, the entity marked as 'club' in this sense cannot be seen as a collection of members who are gathered around their own interest. After all, the club is placed against the demands of the member-consumer. Does such a conception imply a divide between members and member-consumers? And would the preferences of these two separate groups completely differ from each other? The observations made in the previous section pointed at societal differences entangled with consumerism, but apparently these findings do not apply in the same extent to all sport participants.

The organizational consequences for VSCs are also considered in the policy plans analysed. Policy makers suggest that if the demands of the critical sport consumer become central, the present organizational form of VSCs is no longer sufficient. Because traditional clubs lack the required capacity to serve consumers, modernization of these clubs is presented as a necessary step of action.

> The switch towards a market orientation has brought many good ideas for a new sport supply. The implementation of these ideas proves to be difficult in a number of cases because of a lack of knowledge and capacity. (NOC*NSF 2007)

In this respect, it is also important to note that in the analysed policy texts, notions of consumerism significantly differ from commercialization tendencies like Enjolras (2002) observed. No longer, it is argued in these policy texts, does the association logic live up to the expectations of members and potential members of VSCs. Instead, they should operate in a system of supply and demand. This conception can well be compared to the way that neo-liberalism has introduced choice and voice in the public sector. Clarke (2005, p. 449) notes that:

> The view of citizens as consumers of public services has been a consistent and expanding focus, based on the claim that social changes towards a 'consumer culture' have created both experiences and expectations of individualised choice among the population. Against these standards, public services are judged backward, inadequate and dominated by producer paternalism.

For the voluntary sport sector, this means that NSOs suggest organizational change as an answer for the challenges that VSCs face. They should modernize their activities in order to serve the consumer in a way that appeals more to his or her preferences and demands. In the next section, we will show how in the analysed policy texts a fruitful base for modernization measures in VSCs is constructed.

Modernizing the sport club: ditching old values?

Even though the participation in Dutch VSCs is still quite high compared to other countries, the commercial sport sector has experienced a firm growth over the last decades. Policy makers have noticed the fact that commercial sport suppliers, such as health clubs and gyms, have gained a larger 'market share' in the Dutch sport sector. The answer to the increased competition with commercial parties lies, according to the analysed policy documents, in the marketization of VSCs.

> The marketisation of sport first of all requires a valuable sport supply. The bigger the perception of value by the sport consumer, the better this can be marketised. The better the understanding of the sport consumer, the easier the development of a valuable sport supply is. (NOC*NSF 2012)

The link between the sport consumer and the marketization of sport is connected to keywords in the market discourse, such as 'value' and 'supply'. However, competing for a market share seems to be unnatural for mutual support organizations that are not allowed to make profits (cf. Enjolras 2002). The market orientation of NSOs means a break with the old values of the bottom-up membership structure of clubs and federations, but it also illustrates the position of NSOs as organizations that have to compete with each other for sponsorship and lottery funding. NSOs see themselves as promoters of sport for the general public instead of membership-based organizations, which opens up a range of commercially interesting possibilities for the NSOs.

> The free runner should no longer be seen as new member for the future, but should be approached from the position of the Athletics Federation as authority in running. By offering a commercially interesting supply of products and services, the Athletics Federation can strengthen its position. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Atletiek Unie 2004)

Apart from a commercial and market-driven model of sport supply, the Athletics Federation suggests that they are no longer a traditional membership organization, but rather an authority in the running industry. Such a change is visible in more (individual) sports, with individual membership of NSOs as the most important expression of this development. The traditional, bottom-up model of organizing sport in the voluntary sector, with sport participants being members of clubs that are united in an NSO, is set aside. Other ways of making membership in the voluntary sport sector more flexible are suggested to be implemented at the club level. NSOs encourage their clubs to introduce

short-term memberships and subscriptions to sport courses in order to increase the possibilities for flexible sport participation.

> Field hockey is no 'one size fits all'. By tuning the field hockey supply to the demands of members, customer satisfaction will increase. This will retain important members in the club, so that they will be better usable in volunteer tasks. To achieve this, the Field Hockey Federation modifies league systems and introduces new – mostly flexible – forms of field hockey. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Hockey Bond 2010)

The Field Hockey Federation stresses that field hockey clubs should adjust their traditional forms of organizing sport into forms that fit the emerging consumer. In order to retain the consumerist member in the club, other NSOs similarly try to create a new structure in which clubs can offer flexible and custom-made services to sport participants. This is also stressed by the Athletics Federation, who are looking to bring free runners into the VSC.

> Establishing relations between free runners and VSCs and between VSCs and several market players should lead to strengthening the VSC and an increase in the number of members. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Atletiek Unie 2008)

The need for flexibility fits well in broader developments in sport. Pilgaard (2012) argues that there is indeed a need for flexible possibilities in VSCs. She argues that VSCs should behave more as community settings that 'structure the activities in ways that allow for a certain kind of flexibility' (Pilgaard 2012, p. 88). This argument can also be found in some of the analysed policy texts.

> [In 2020], clubs have reoriented themselves on the sport market and have created a fitting supply (concerning training, activities and membership forms) for the Dutchman anno 2020, who needs custom-made services and quality. (Koninklijke Nederlandsche Schaatsenrijders Bond 2011)

In line with Pilgaard (2012), the increased need for flexibility can certainly be recognized in the analysed policy texts. However, the need for flexibility is often mixed with a suggested need for 'services' in which sport participants are portrayed as consumers. This is an important difference from the flexibility that Pilgaard (2012) suggests, a type of flexibility that still resides within the association logic. She argues that VSCs could benefit from an approach 'that allows members to stay connected to a well-known social setting, giving a feeling of security, and structures the activities in ways that allow for a certain kind of flexibility' (p. 88). However, within the consumerist discourse, the social setting of VSCs seems to be set aside. Here, the flexibilization of membership forms, the creation of a 'fitting supply' and the call for quality requires clubs to organize their sport in a different way. Adapting to demands of consumerist sport participants asks for extended opening hours of clubs and an active role of sport instructors or coaches. The profile of professionally led health clubs serves as an example to voluntary clubs here. As a consequence, clubs are pressured to professionalize their management and coaching staff, because many volunteers will not be available during business hours and might lack expertize that the modern VSC should offer.

The introduction of professionals and professionalization in clubs is presented as an all-embracing answer to the challenges that VSCs face. The suggested decline of volunteering as well as the perceived emergence of the demanding and critical consumer is seen

as incentives for bringing in professionals in VSCs. Professionals are thought to bring quality, flexibility and stability in VSCs. Contrary to volunteers, who are often seen as being too noncommittal, professionals should be able to create an environment of high-standing conditions. While NSOs used to portray volunteers as the mainstay of the VSC, they are described in today's policy texts as a barrier to the further development of sport.

> Volunteerism does not mean that one is without obligations. Volunteers do make a serious contribution to the professionalisation of a field hockey club. Still, for reasons of required competencies and expertise, available time and continuance, the introduction of professionals is an essential condition to achieve professional development. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Hockey Bond and Ten Have Change Management 2009)

> In the pursuit of further improvement of the quality of club supply, mutual collaboration and the extension of professionalization of VSCs are essential conditions (Koninklijke Nederlandse Atletiek Unie 2004).

The discourse of consumerism is so powerful that professionalization is presented as an unavoidable step in improving services to fulfil the needs of the member-consumer. This suggests that clubs are left with little choice with respect to professionalization. Although the implications for VSCs are far-reaching, policy makers present professionalization as an inevitable development.

> Increases in scale and professionalisation are needed to restore the central position of gymnastics in society. (…) Provision of a broad and deep assortment of products and services, professionally and attractively organised, in every town, in every neighbourhood. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Gymnastiek Unie 2011)

The direct link between an increase in scale and professionalization in this quote is not coincidental. The legitimacy of small-sized clubs is widely questioned in Dutch sport policy. Policy makers argue that small clubs are not as effective as big clubs and that they are vulnerable to organizational problems. Clubs are encouraged to achieve an increase in their number of members, to merge with other clubs and to look for societal partners like schools (Koninklijk Nederlands Korfbal Verbond 2009, Koninklijke Nederlandse Hockey Bond 2010), even though it is acknowledged that this will have unintended consequences.

> If VSCs cooperate on a local level, this can lead to quality improvements, to expansion of the sport supply and to joint activities that provide better quality. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Atletiek Unie 2004)

> Growth and professionalisation of a club – which result in a necessity of commercialisation – do influence the atmosphere and the culture. By the way, this could turn out positively. But, it is the duty of the club director to manage possible tensions that could come along with growth. (Koninklijke Nederlandse Hockey Bond and Ten Have Change Management 2009)

It is yet unknown whether the discourse in policies is translated into actual organizational practices in VSCs. It is striking to see that, other than some nods to professionalization and growth, actual organizational changes are not suggested in the analysed policies. However, the rhetorical power of the discourse should not be underestimated, as the story that underlies the consumerist discourse is a story that is 'pragmatic, positive and forward looking' (Lister 2000, Adams 2011). From this perspective, the association logic has been put under pressure, but it is yet unknown what consequences this will have for VSCs. After all, changes in the way clubs are organized are actively contested and negotiated, so

it is not a simple process of policy implementation (Vidler and Clarke 2005, p. 32). Thus, so far, we can only guess what implications the use of the discourse will have on VSCs.

Still, the pressure to organize clubs according to a 'consumer logic' is apparent in policy texts, which might turn out to be a novel example of the classical Thomas theorem (Thomas and Thomas 1928, p. 572), which describes that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. This way, perceived consumerism could turn out to be causing premature policy actions. These policy actions might in turn put pressure on club administrators to reorganize their club, without knowing whether the public indeed demands a more consumerist-driven model of sport participation. In fact, according to the Thomas theorem, a more consumer-oriented policy could subsequently invite people to behave as consumers.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued how a consumerist discourse is constructed in Dutch sport policy. Views on how to serve consumers dominate the way sport participants and VSCs are seen in these policy texts. Within the consumerist discourse, two kinds of consumerism can be found. First, a threatening kind of consumerism in clubs is identified. This notion of the consumer is characterized by individualistic behaviour and self-interest, which would lead to a loss in the number of members in VSCs. The second account of the consumer serves as a window of opportunity for policy makers to improve sport activities.

Future research and limitations

First and foremost, our study shows that it is unclear whether there is indeed evidence of a consumerist attitude among (potential) club members. In our view, this is the most important implication of our article. We challenge researchers and policy makers to provide empirical evidence on a consumerist attitude within the voluntary sport sector. If there is indeed evidence of consumerism in this sector, the consequences can be considered with respect to the 'association logic' (Ibsen and Seippel 2010) and the future of VSCs as mutual support organizations. But first, we need to develop an instrument that can determine whether people that practise sport, and potential sport participants, indeed change from club members into sport consumers.

Second, we think the relationship between NSOs and VSCs deserves more attention in sport policy research (cf. Garrett 2003, Harris *et al.* 2009). Our analysis shows that VSCs face pressures from NSO policy plans, but it remains unclear to what extent these pressures indeed lead to changes in the structure and activities of VSCs.

We would also like to stress the importance of an international perspective on consumerism in the voluntary sport sector. The Dutch case of a consumerist discourse among sport policy makers can be seen as an exemplary case for other countries that have VSCs as the dominant organizational form in grassroots sport. An international perspective could help to understand the empirical tenability of claims made within the consumerist discourse by NSOs and what meanings and consequences this discourse has for VSCs at the local level.

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Note

1. The biggest NSOs based on their total number of members in 2010 (NOC*NSF 2011) were researched. The policy plans of the NSOs in the following sports were gathered and analysed: Athletics, Bridge, Equestrian Sports, Field Hockey, Football, Golf, Gymnastics, Judo, Korfball, Skating, Skiing, Swimming, Tennis, Volleyball and Yachting.

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