Is Sport Really an Attractive Volunteering Context? Implications from Volunteer Comparisons between the Sport and Non-Sport Contexts

Jaeyeon Hwang, University of South Dakota
James J. Zhang, University of Georgia

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Maintaining a strong volunteer base is important to the organizations hosting sport events because doing so enables the organizations to have the needed human resources to accomplish organizational objectives more effectively. Successful management based on the understanding of volunteers allows the organizations to save operational costs and other resources required for volunteer recruitment, training, and education in an effort to retain more committed volunteer workforce (e.g., Chelladurai, 1999; Moragas, Moreno, & Paniagua, 2000). In recent years, there have been growing research inquiries into sport volunteerism, particularly those factors affecting the behavior of volunteers, such as sport volunteer motivation and commitment, and how these affect volunteer satisfaction in various sport contexts (e.g., Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; MacLean & Hamm, 2007; Reeser, Berg, Rhea, & Willick, 2005). As sport organizations often compete for volunteers with other types of organizations, understanding the unique features of the sport volunteerism would be essential. Previous studies have identified that a majority of sport volunteers had strong individual connections with the sport, thus having a higher level of sport involvement and identification. It is speculated that when highlighting these characteristics, sport organizations may have competitive advantages in recruiting and retaining volunteers because of the attractiveness of sport as a volunteering context. Nonetheless, to date no empirical study has been found that compare sport volunteers with other types of volunteers; therefore, this study was designed to investigate whether a sport context would be really an attractive volunteering context. Specifically, the purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to examine the influence of two different types of identification on the intention for volunteering in both sport and non-sport settings and (b) to compare the differences in identification and volunteerism intention between sport and non-sport settings.

A review of literature reveals that previous research findings support the idea that an individual’s identity as a volunteer is one of the significant predictors for future volunteer intentions (Lee, Piliavin, & Call, 1999; Piliavin & Callero, 1991). Volunteers at sport organizations and their events usually had sport participation experiences, presenting certain level of sport attachment and commitment (Burgham & Downward, 2005; Cusakelly, 2004; Downward & Ralston, 2005; Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998). These support the notion that the value that individuals placed upon the sport itself, or identification with the sport, is a critical factor influencing people to become sport volunteers. Combining these concepts, identification can be specified into general volunteer identification and context-specific identification (i.e., sport identification and music identification).

Based on a comprehensive review of literature, the questionnaire contained items measuring general volunteer identification, sport/musical specific identification, intentions for future volunteering, and demographics. Volunteer identification and context-specific identification were assessed with four items for each construct by adopting the Sport Fandom Questionnaire (Wann, 2002). Intention for future volunteering was measured by three items adopted from the MacLean and Hamm’s study (2007). Content validity of the questionnaire in terms of relevance, representativeness, and clarity was evaluated by a panel of three experts in sport volunteer studies. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 489 adult volunteers, including 346 volunteers working at four marathon events and 143 volunteers working at four music festival events held recently in North America. Conducting an online survey, data collection was completed right after an event. Only those individuals who fully completed the survey were included in the study (n=443).

Data were first used to examine the internal consistencies of the measures (Cronbach’s α), which ranged from .720 to .936. Multiple-regression analyses were then performed with both groups of volunteers to examine the impact of volunteer identification and context-specific identification (i.e., sport identification and music identification) on the intention for future volunteering, which revealed statistically significant in both groups of volunteers [SPORT (F (2, 312) = 29.58, p < .001); MUSIC (F (2, 125) = 19.31, p < .001)]. In detail, volunteer identification [SPORT (β = .320, t = 6.07, p < .001); MUSIC (β = .423, t = 5.34, p < .001)] and context-specific identification [SPORT (β = .186, t = 3.52, p <
MUSIC ($\beta = .176, t = 2.22, p < .05$)] had significant impact on the intention for future volunteering and explained 15.9% and 23.6% of the variance in the sport and the music volunteer groups, respectively. Then, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare group means between the sport volunteers and music volunteers in terms of the two types of identifications and future volunteering intention. Significant group difference was found only in the area of context-specific identification [SPORT ($M = 21.93, SD = 5.82$), MUSIC ($M = 25.64, SD = 3.44$); $t(384.04) = 8.30, p < .001$].

The current study represents an initial attempt to confirm the features of sport volunteers through empirical comparisons between sport event and non-sport event volunteers. Volunteer identification and context-specific identification were significant predictors of intentions for future volunteering in both groups of volunteers. Consistent with the previous studies (e.g., Cuskelly, 2004; Downward, Lumsdon, & Ralston, 2005), this study found that volunteers in the sport context presented strong psychological connections with the sport setting. The finding that volunteers working at music festivals had higher identification with the music event suggests that individual connections with the volunteering context is not a phenomenon only applicable to the sport volunteers; thus, it is possible that the attractiveness of sport as a context for volunteering might be overestimated in previous studies. Regardless, further studies including various other contexts of volunteering would provide more in-depth and confirming implications for volunteer management.