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Management/leadership Thursday, June 4, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
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Numerous studies recognize the benefits of sport participation for youth development, both on and off the field of play (Barnett, 2008; Coakley, 2011; Danish & Nellen, 1997; Jones & Lavallee, 2009; Ogden & Warneke, 2010). Coakley (2011) suggests that, “sport and development is grounded in the dual assumption that sport, unlike other activities, has a fundamentally positive and pure essence that transcends time and place so that positive changes befall individuals and groups that engage in or consume sport” (p. 307). There are, however, many different forms of sport participation that encourage development; one such form is on elite travel teams created to compete with similar organizations of representative (rep) athletes (i.e., youth rep ice hockey in Canada). Elite youth hockey provides the context for the current investigation.

One of the major factors that contribute to sport participation is the decision-making of parents. Schwab, Wells, and Arthur-Banning (2010) indicate that “in youth sports, both parents and children are the customers, and administrators need to satisfy both groups to ensure customer loyalty” (p. 41). As Barnett (2008) notes, understanding the antecedent influences or drivers motivating “parents to enroll their child in different types of programs” (p. 28), including at the rep level, is needed. Similarly, Mitchell (2012) acknowledges the increased interest in the roles family members play in decision-making processes. Here, a gap exists in the sport management literature in that limited research has explored influences on consumption decisions made on behalf of an individual, for example, parents’ decisions to enroll or allow their child to play rep sports. In these instances, parents become a proxy for their child’s involvement in a particular sport or specific participatory level of competition. Green and Chalip (1998) acknowledge the importance of this proxy status noting, “although children are the users of youth sport services, it is their parents who are the purchasers” (p. 95).

The empirical context of the investigation was youth hockey in Ontario, Canada. To guide the investigation, three research questions were put forward: First, what perceived attributes do parents associate with enrolling their child in rep level youth hockey? Second, what perceived consequences or benefits do parents associate with enrolling their child in rep level youth hockey? And third, how do the attributes and consequences or benefits relate to one another?

Previous research (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) has suggested that much human behavior is goal directed and people tend to make decisions because of the consequences (benefits) they believe will result from them. Thus, we expected that parents’ decisions to enroll their children in youth “rep” hockey might be informed by particular attributes and consequences or benefits they perceive to be associated with participation.

Through qualitative research methods, we employed a series of in-depth, one-on-one laddering interviews were conducted with parents (n=28). Essentially, laddering is a probing technique that moves people from concrete attributes to more abstract consequences or benefits. Laddering forces individuals to look beyond the easily identifiable attributes of a brand, service, or product (i.e., colour, size, weight, taste etc.) and focus on benefits achieved from these attributes (i.e., happiness, comfort, savings etc.). Fundamentally, laddering guides individuals to articulate “why and how product attributes are important” (Klenosky, Gengler, & Mulvey, 1993, p. 364). Upon completion of each interview the dialogue was transcribed verbatim. Next, each of the researchers individually coded the data, specifically considering the linkages between noted attributes and consequences or benefits to establish content codes (Goldenberg, Klenosky, O’Leary, & Templin, 2000).

It became evident from the this study’s data that the respondents’ perception of rep hockey was a vehicle to promote
the skills, ideals and character to assist in the development of socially secure individuals later in life, which is conducive with previous research (i.e., Coakley, 2006; Hutchinson, Baldwin, and Caldwell, 2003; and Schawb et al., 2010). Our findings support expectancy-value theories of behavior. Specifically, through the linking of attributes to particular consequences via the laddering interview technique, important insights into the nature of parental decision-making about elite youth sport participation were uncovered. For example, parent respondents’ decision to enroll their child into youth rep hockey seems tied to the attainment of benefits in the form of learning life lessons/skills (to become productive citizens), enhanced hockey skill development (leading to improved confidence), friendship development, learned discipline/accountability and increased work ethic. It then becomes important for managers to make sure the “right” lessons are being taught as a means of satisfying the expectations of the parents.

A fundamental challenge that exists for managers operating within a youth sporting system is to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders (e.g., consumers, sponsors, volunteer coaches, and executive board members) (Schwab et al., 2010). Furthermore, Schwab et al. state that “meeting customer expectations with regard to youth sport services is important because it can increase stakeholder satisfaction, which leads to increased loyalty to a recreation agency [or sport agency]” (p. 44). We suggest a similar sentiment to that of Schawb et al. (2010), where management could focus on enhancing parents’ youth sport experience, as “they are the ones who will make the final decisions about their children’s future participation” (p. 47). Thus, understanding the parental perceptions of attributes and consequences of competing in “rep” hockey is important for managers of elite youth rep sport organizations.

The findings from this study provide a baseline for future studies designed to assess parental motivation when enrolling children into elite level (“rep”) youth sports, specifically rep hockey. An interesting future study would be to reproduce the current investigation on parents of house league hockey players. Further, replicating the study with parents of youth rep participants in other team sports such as soccer, baseball and basketball could be of similar interest. Finally, conducting a similar investigation with parents of elite youth athletes competing in individual sports such as tennis, golf and swimming might provide interesting revelations of different drivers for these two (team vs. individual sport) parental groups.