Consumer Evaluations of a Youth Soccer Club: The Effects of Gender and Parents' Soccer Experience

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Introduction and Literature Review

There has been increasing policy concern over the design, management, and marketing of youth sport – so much so that a national effort to reform youth sport has emerged under the banner, “Project Play” (www.aspenprojectplay.org). The policy effort has endeavored to create higher levels of youth sport participation by fostering creation of youth sport settings that are particularly child centered. A core objective is to reduce the focus on elite (aka: select) sport programs, and to enhance the nature and quality of programs that are grounded in playful trial of multiple sport opportunities. An underlying premise of the program reform effort is that any benefits to be gained via youth sport are reduced if children or adolescents discontinue their participation (Keathley, Himelein, & Srigley, 2013). Although research on youth sport participation and withdrawal dates back to the 1980s, few studies have been carried out in a managerial context with specific reference to player retention in the sport and in their club (e.g., Lin, Chalip, & Green, 2016). While it has been assumed that there is a positive relationship between satisfaction with service elements and intention to repurchase (Murray & Howat, 2002), the dynamics of that relationship are poorly understood in youth sport contexts because although children consume the experience, their parents purchase it (Howard & Madrigal, 1990). Indeed, the benefits that parents seek for their children may be based on their expectations and personal experience in sport, rather than the immediate experience their children obtain (Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008; Weiss & Fretwell, 2005). Further, as a consequence of differing role expectations, gender may play a vital role insomuch as mothers and fathers can differ in their expectations and consequent behaviors (Davison, Cutting, & Birch, 2003), and those expectations and behaviors may differ if the child is male or female (Carter & Wotjkiewicz, 2000). Thus, this research explores the effects of parental experience in a sport, parent and child gender, and parents’ evaluation of a club on their intention to have their child continue participating in the sport and, if so, to re-enroll in the club.

Method

Parents of youth soccer players from a large, southwestern soccer club were asked to complete an online survey of their perceptions of their child’s soccer experience. Three hundred fifty-eight completed surveys were obtained. Slightly more mothers than fathers responded (45% male; 55% female). Sixty percent of the players were girls. The children participated on a range of teams of varying age groups (U10 to U18) and skill levels (recreational to highly select travel teams).

Data were analyzed via a 2 (parent experience or not) 2 (select or recreational) 2 (parent gender) 2 (child’s gender) MANOVA. Dependent variables were: likelihood to play soccer next year, likelihood to play for the soccer club next year, evaluation of three elements of the club (vision, operations, tryouts). All were measured on 6-point Likert-type scales. Items within each subscale were averaged to form an overall indicator of the construct.

Results

The overall MANOVA was significant, F(7, 157) = 2.64, p=.014. Univariate tests revealed a 4-way interaction explaining evaluation of the club F(1, 163) = 5.02, p=.026; and evaluation of club operations, F(1, 163) = 7.55, p=.007. Fathers with no soccer experience with daughters playing select reported much lower evaluations of the club than did all other groups. Evaluation of club operations was fairly high for most groups; however, fathers with no
soccer experience were much less pleased with the operations of their daughters’ select teams, than were other groups. Evaluation of the coaching is explained by the 3-way interaction of team type (recreation or select), parent’s gender, and child’s gender, $F(1, 163) = 4.62, p=.033$. Fathers with daughters in select programs rate coaches significantly lower than do mothers of select players or parents of recreational players. Likelihood to return to soccer and likelihood to return to the club were a function of 3-way interactions among team type, gender, and parent’s soccer experience. Experienced mothers were least likely to report their child would continue to play select soccer at any club, $F(1, 163) = 13.32, p<0.001$; fathers without soccer experience reported the least likelihood of their child returning to the club or to soccer to play select, $F(1, 163) = 6.98, p=.009$.

Discussion
Gender and parents’ experience with soccer impacted the ways in which parents evaluated the experiences of their child’s soccer club. Soccer experience is a proxy for knowledge of the game. It is therefore, interesting to note that knowledge seems to increase the expectations that parents have for their child’s soccer provider, with parents’ evaluations being harshest when their child plays for a select team. This makes conceptual sense, as parents are ostensibly investing more time, money, and effort in a select soccer experience. These findings highlight the highly segmented nature of the youth soccer experience, and suggest the need to consider parent and child gender when formulating programs.