Willingness-to-Volunteer versus Willingness-to-Pay in Sport Clubs: How Organizational Capacity Affects Individual Decisions

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Volunteers are a critical resource of the organized sport sector in many European countries (European Commission, 2011). Therefore, the European Union and several member states have policies promoting volunteering in non-profit sport organizations (e.g., European Commission, 2011; German Olympic Sports Confederation [DOSB], 2015; HM Government, 2015). However, sport clubs in many European countries suffer from decreasing volunteer numbers. For example, within German sport clubs, the number of voluntary board members has significantly decreased between 2009 and 2013 (Breuer & Feiler, 2013, 2015). During the same period, the share of clubs employing paid staff in leading positions has significantly increased (Breuer & Feiler, 2015). Hence, there seems to be a tendency that voluntary work has been partially replaced by paid work over the last years (Breuer et al., 2012).

Applying the income-leisure trade-off (Downward et al., 2009) to sport clubs suggests that clubs need a bit of both resources – human resources (voluntary work) and financial resources. However, many tasks and activities within sport clubs can be performed by either volunteers or paid staff, indicating that human and financial resources can be partially substituted (Coates et al., 2014). For example, the preparation of playing courts at the beginning of an outdoor season can be done by either club members who work as volunteers or by paid maintenance staff. Likewise, food and beverages for social events at the club can be provided by club members or by a commercial caterer. If these activities are performed by paid workers, additional financial resources must be secured to finance their salaries. Several sport clubs address this issue already: They offer their members the opportunity to buy their way out of voluntary work by paying higher membership fees. In this regard it is important for club management to understand how their members would respond to different voluntary work and payment options. Of particular interest are organizational determinants because they can be adjusted by club management, while individual factors, such as age, gender, and income, are beyond the influence of club management.

The purpose of this study is to examine the trade-off between willingness-to-volunteer (WTV) and willingness-to-pay (WTP) of members in non-profit sport clubs. Specifically, this research investigates under which conditions club members prefer voluntary work over higher membership fees and vice versa. It advances the following main research question: How do organizational and individual factors affect club members’ preferences for WTV or WTP?

Previous research has only examined the determinants of WTV and WTP separately. For example, existing studies have investigated the role of organizational capacity (Swierzy et al., 2017a) and other club-level factors (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013) on voluntary engagement in sport clubs. Moreover, various individual factors determining voluntary engagement have been widely studied (for an overview see Wicker, 2017). Likewise, existing research has analyzed the roles of individual factors (Kiefer, 2014; Wicker, 2011) and organizational capacity (Swierzy et al., 2017b) in determining WTP. However, the specific trade-off between WTV and WTP has not yet been studied.

The theoretical framework of this research is based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the concept of organizational capacity (Hall et al., 2003). According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), individual behavior depends on a constant interaction between individual factors and social ecologies on higher levels surrounding it. Microsystems such as sport clubs represent one of these social ecologies and they influence individual behavior immediately and directly. This theory acknowledges the relevance of the organizational context to individual decisions. This organizational context is conceptualized by organizational capacity which is multi-dimensional in nature and assumes that organizations need human resources, financial, and structural capacities to
fulfill their mandates and achieve their goals (Hall et al., 2003). For example, human resources capacity includes existing volunteers and paid staff, financial capacity refers to financial resources, and structural capacity includes sport facilities, club culture, and strategic planning.

Non-profit sport clubs in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) that offer football (soccer) and track and field represent the research context for this study. The research methodology included club and member surveys between March and May 2016. Of the 5,260 football and track and field clubs in this area, 3,569 provided correct email addresses and were invited to participate in the survey. Club representatives were asked to forward the individual survey to their members. After sending three reminders, 615 clubs and 1,077 club members completed the survey.

Since the analysis requires complete information from members and their corresponding clubs, the final sample includes n=228 clubs and n=636 members from these clubs.

The club survey assessed several measures of organizational capacity in line with previous research (Swierzy et al., 2017a; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). The member questionnaire measured a range of individual factors, such as age, gender, education, income, identification and satisfaction with the club, utilization of club programs, participation in competitions, as well as current membership fee and voluntary hours per month. The latter information was entered in the contingent valuation part of the survey which included two scenarios – a positive scenario assuming investments into club programs and facilities and a negative one suggesting that the club has serious financial problems. Respondents were randomly assigned to one scenario. Based on these scenarios, WTV and WTP were elicited in a double-dichotomous choice format that randomly assigned increases in voluntary hours and membership fees between 5% and 50%. Respondents were then asked to state whether they would prefer volunteering or paying higher membership fees under these conditions. Depending on their answer to the first question, respondents were assigned a higher or lower increase in the second question. The scenarios yielded the binary outcome variable (0=WTP, 1=WTV) which served as the dependent variable in the probit models. The models were estimated with standard errors clustered by clubs and individuals to account for the hierarchical data structure and the question format, respectively.

The descriptive statistics show that 86.7% of respondents are male and the average age is 44.9 years. Average educational level is equivalent to A-levels and average income to €2,800 net per month. Altogether, 41.4% of respondents play competitive sports, 17.1% participate in track and field, and 79.2% in football. Average utilization of club programs is 7.8 days per month. Overall, respondents pay a monthly membership fee of €7.69 and perform 23 hours of voluntary work per month. Turning to organizational capacity, sport clubs have 442 members on average and 2.8 paid employees. Approximately 10% of members work as volunteers. Most clubs break even (86.9%) and report low financial problems (M=2.31 on a five-point scale). On average, club culture includes providing sport for all (M=3.92), promoting youth (M=4.08), and valuing conviviality (M=4.16). Average agreement to having a strategic plan is moderate (M=3.74 on a five-point scale).

Initial regression results show that the percentage increase in membership fee is significantly and negatively associated with WTV, while the percentage increase in voluntary work has a significant positive association. The current membership fee and volume of voluntary work are both insignificant. The measures combining the percentage increase with current fee or voluntary work levels are also insignificant in another set of models. These findings suggest that members have stable preferences towards voluntary engagement which are not changed by additional volunteering hours or higher membership fee levels. Put differently, members volunteer or not, independent of financial consequences or additional time commitments. The likelihood of preferring WTV over WTP is higher in clubs with fewer paid staff and a strategic plan. In clubs that do not break even the likelihood of preferring WTV over WTP is significantly higher. On the individual level, utilization of club programs positively affects WTV, while educational level has a negative effect. The findings have implications for club management.