Child Game-Day Socialization: The Importance of Community to Emotional Involvement on Game Day

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Regardless of the generation or the economy, parents of all income levels sacrifice to give their children things that make them happy. It has been estimated that individuals born after 1994, typically referred to as Generation Z, spend about $44 billion each year, most of it in the form of allowance from parents (Lane, 2014). When we include the sway children hold over what their parents buy, this number is estimated to be closer to $200 billion (Heller, 2015). With so much buying power, this generation should be a major focus of sport management research. However, this has not been the case. There have been numerous studies focusing on children as sport participants (e.g., Bowers & Green, 2013; Martin, Ewing, & Gould, 2014), but very few on children as sport fans and on their consumption of sport through fandom (James, 2001).

Heere and James (2007) proposed viewing the sport team as a community in which the fans do not see themselves as consumers of a product, but as a member of a group. More recent research (Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015) supports that view and suggests that the fan community and/or the interaction between fans is more important to game attendance than the actual game itself. Based on that perspective, then, we could argue that the most important question for marketers is not what attracts an individual to a game, but how individuals can be socialized into the fan community and develop an attachment to that community (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011). The live experience has been characterized by high levels of arousal and pleasure (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010, 2012), and it provides the attendee with social value through unique opportunities for social bonding and enhanced community acceptance (Funk, Filo, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2009). The game-day experience, therefore, plays an integral part in both the development of an emotional connection towards a team as well as towards the community of fans that attend games together.

Most prior research has focused on how adult fans socialize into these communities (Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015), yet James (2001) would argue that most people choose their favorite teams at a very young age (6-10 years old), and further, that most of us are unwilling to switch our preference later in life. Therefore, it is critical for researchers to focus on children and how they make sense of the game day experience and socialize into the fan community. How children socialize into these communities during game day has yet to be studied. While children are most often introduced to sport fandom by their socializing agents such as family members and friends, (Kolbe & James, 2000; McPherson, 1976; Melnick & Wann, 2011; Tufte, 2007), very few studies have looked at how game attendance has affected this socialization experience.

Therefore, it is the general aim of the authors to explore the game-day experiences of children in order to better understand how these experiences allow children to socialize into the team community and become fans of the team. These findings should aid researchers and sport marketers in their understanding of how to build a fan base among future generations and increase the sustainability of the fan community.

As our goal was to better understand children's game day experiences and how they socialize into the community during game day, a qualitative approach was used to study the behaviors of children ranging from six to fourteen years old at sporting events. The exploratory nature of our study led to the inclusion of a broad age range in order to initially identify overarching phenomena present in all children socializing into sport fan communities through game attendance. A qualitative study approach was chosen because surveying (young) children provides difficult challenges, particularly in the field (Borgers, De Leeuw, & Hox, 2000). Because of the limitations associated with survey research among children, we chose to observe them in this ‘natural setting’, and interview them informally.
Observational and interview data were collected at seven professional sporting events throughout the Southeastern and Midwestern United States. National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), and National Basketball Association (NBA) games were included to increase the generalizability of the results. College sport games were excluded because they are unique to the United States, and its inclusion may limit generalizability. Observations of the interactions between children and their group members and the emotional responses of the children throughout the games were the central component of the data collection, and the interviews were conducted to better understand the observations and to triangulate the data (Denzin, 1970; Thurmond, 2001). As socialization is a sociological phenomenon, relying on observations were deemed to be an appropriate method, while interviews provided more insight into what is being observed. In total, 26 interviews were conducted with child attendees totaling over 70 pages of transcribed data.

Data analysis followed the qualitative data analysis method utilized by O’Leary (2005). The method entails a four-step analysis process: reading the data, creating notes and memos to increase understanding, organizing and coding, and finally searching for patterns in the coding to draw conclusions. All recorded field notes and interviews were transcribed after each professional sporting event, and these transcriptions were then uploaded into nVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Using an open coding method, this software allowed first basic, and later more complex, patterns to be identified in the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) by the primary researcher. Themes discovered by the primary researcher were discussed with the other researchers in order to strengthen the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The results showed evidence that children primarily focus on exploring ways to build membership in the fan community as opposed to initially building connections to the team itself. In addition, those children that watched the games with their peers demonstrated greater in-game emotional responses than those children who viewed the game with family. Younger children showed a desire to be taught how to obtain membership in the fan community, while older children looked to prove their membership in their fan group. Badging and memorabilia were utilized as expression tools to enhance children’s fan experience and to aid in the socialization of the children deeper into the fan community.

This study provides support for the importance of community membership in the initial stages of sport team fandom as well as further brand community research that explores the purposes that different groups within fan communities have for children. Three propositions are made as contributions to child fan literature: 1) Children are more responsive to the overall atmosphere of the event than to the actual game itself, 2) Children mimic the behavior and expressions of their immediate surroundings, 3) Children make sense of the event through their interactions with the other fans, their peers, and/or their family, and 4) For children, badging is one of the most important practices to show that they are legitimate members of the community.