Assessing the Effects of Major League Soccer Official Supporter's Group Membership on Child Spectator Team Identification

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The purpose of this study is to examine how a child’s membership in sport team supporter groups affects team identification and behaviors. As explained by Social Identity Theory, group membership creates an atmosphere for members that allows them to generate an understanding of themselves and the world around them (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Team identity (Team ID) has been defined as the “extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected to a team” (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001, p. 3). Scholars suggest that Team ID is a multidimensional construct which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the elements believed to comprise identification with an object, including how the elements relate to one another (Heere & James, 2007). Heere, James, Yoshida, and Scremin (2011) provide evidence that multiple group identities have an influence on sport fans and their development of Team ID. Examples of these groups include the city, town, or state that the person lives in, demographic groups such as gender, race, and age, as well as any social groups to which the individual may belong. This study looks at the effect of one of those social groups: the Official Supporter’s Group (OSG).

OSG’s are defined as groups of spectators who are officially recognized by the sport organization as a representative fan group with a stated purpose of supporting their team through coordinated chants, songs, and/or choreographed behaviors (Reid, 2018). Children represent a niche fan group that has reported different relationships and abilities to form these relationships than adult fans (Reifurth, Bernthal, & Heere, 2018). We know very little about how children’s team identification is developed, and inclusion in (or exclusion from) OSG’s may have significant effects on the ways in which children develop connections to a team. This study explores the effects of this inclusion/exclusion to expand the literature on child fans and team identification.

Two groups of children are recruited for participation: OSG members and non-members (i.e., individuals who attend games but who are not part of an OSG). Consistent with Reifurth et al. (2018), oral interviews of children between the ages of six and seventeen will be conducted at Major League Soccer team home games. Interviews will consist of open-ended questions to assess level of association with the team, as well as Likert-scale questions utilizing child-centric wording and visuals to assess dimensions of psychological connection to the team. Thematic coding is employed to develop quantifiable data from the retrieved qualitative information. Statistical analysis is used to assess group differences, as well as effects that membership in an OSG has upon child Team ID and resulting behaviors.

The practical implications of this study include insights for sport managers and academics about the ways in which OSG’s influence a child’s identification with a team. Results of our research will better inform practitioners how to both utilize OSG’s to increase positive effects and minimize negative outcomes on the connection child fans have to professional soccer teams.