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# THE ROLE OF AGE IN ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM PROFESSIONAL SPORTS IN GERMANY

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## Abstract

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For a long time, the potential of best agers as discrete consumer group has been neglected. However, according to their increasing size in Western societies and relatively high available income, best agers became an attractive target group. Similarly organizations are more and more forced to tailor their services to the specific needs of customers belonging to different age-clusters such as children, adolescents or middle-agers. As a result, age seems to become one of the most important characteristics for customer segmentation. In light of this development it is not surprising that even professional sports clubs – following the needs of their fans - provide offerings tailored to different age groups (e.g. accessibility, play grounds, family enclosure sections). If you look at the literature, the relationship between a sports club and its differently aged fans can be explained by the theory of team identification (TI). Although both, economists and management scholars, have more recently shown an increasing interest in the behavioral and emotional effects of TI, its antecedents, are still poorly understood (Dimmock & Gucciardi, 2008). In particular, this is true for the role of age in TI which has received little, if any, scholarly attention so far (Tobar, 2006). Adapting a club's product and service offerings to the specific needs of differently aged fans is essential for economics of a club since it does not only benefit from the moral support of its highly identified fans, but also from their comparatively high monetary investments (game tickets, merchandising, stadium consumption). Hence, understanding the

concept of TI as well as its antecedents can be a valuable step towards ensuring a club's long-term financial success.

In this paper we aim to complement the existing literature by examining the role of age, as well as an extensive set of additional socio-demographic determinants in organizational identification "through the lens of sport" (Day et al., 2012, p. 3). Therefore we use unique and proprietary data, generated by five survey-based studies (total n=4036). More precisely, we examine the role of age in an individual's identification with its favorite sports club - each study thereby focusing on a specific club in a different development stage. Firstly, we look at two well-established soccer teams from the German Premier Football League: Bundesliga: Bayern Munich (n=449, 49 years in Bundesliga) and Borussia Dortmund (n=352, 47 years), secondly, we examine a developed but comparably less established soccer team, Bayer Leverkusen (n=1.120, 35 years), thirdly we investigate a club situated in a developing phase: VfL Wolfsburg (n=756, 17 years) and fourthly, we look at TSG Hoffenheim (n=523, 6 years), a club being in an initial phase. In a fifth study, we conduct analyses involving a well-established team from the Basketball Bundesliga: Telekom Baskets Bonn (n=836). Drawing from the interdisciplinary literature on human well-being and psychological health of individuals in varying life phases, we expect a quadratic, u-shaped relationship between age and identification, indicating that TI is comparatively high for both, relatively young and relatively old customers.

The influence of age on TI is estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS), where TI is measured on a 5-point Likert scale. More precisely, TI is approximated by a well-established construct composed of six questions, measuring the extent to which the participant identifies oneself with a certain sports team (see e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 1995).

To examine the robustness of AGE, our key variable, we run four different estimations with the number of independent variables increased each time. Our first specification includes just the participant's age, as well as the corresponding quadratic term; the second extends our specification with both, the participant's gender and nationality; the third adds factors concerned with the participants social/professional life (e.g., relationship status/occupation); and the fourth includes information on the individual's current self-contentment.

Overall our results confirm a quadratic, u-shaped relationship between age and TI in all six settings, including the basketball scenario. The estimated TI with, for example, Leverkusen, is 3.89, 3.14 and 3.71 at the age of 13, 48 and 79, respectively. Moreover, the turning point of the quadratic trend seems to be quite comparable for most of the teams; that is Munich (41), Bonn (41), Hoffenheim (46), Dortmund (47) and Wolfsburg (60).

Our results, give reason to presume that club officials in charge of marketing are well advised to develop specific product packages to (re-)attract putative lost customers in the autumn of their lives. In the best case, however, those packages should also address young adherents.

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