
Does context matter? Analysing structural and individual factors of member commitment in sport clubs

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Type: Scientific

Category: J: Volunteering and voluntary sport organizations

Abstract

1. Aim of the paper

In recent decades, sport clubs have lost their “monopoly” in the market for sports-related services and are increasingly in competition with other sports providers. For many sport clubs long-term membership cannot be seen as a matter of course. Current research on sport clubs in Switzerland – as well as for other European countries – confirms the increasing difficulties in achieving long-term member commitment. The relevance of stable memberships is crucial from a resource perspective (members make important temporal contributions to their club). A closer look at recent findings from various sport club reports reveals that not all clubs are suffering equally from a decrease in membership numbers. Some – because of their specific situational and structural conditions – have few problems with member fluctuation, whereas others show considerable declines. Thus, it can be assumed that the commitment of members may also depend on the distinctive conditions within each sport club. Therefore, a clear understanding of individual and structural factors that trigger and sustain member commitment would help sports clubs to tackle this problem more effectively. This situation poses the question: What are the individual and structural determinants that influence the tendency to continue or to quit the membership?

2. Theoretical background

Existing research has extensively investigated the drivers of members’ commitment at an individual level. As commitment of members usually occurs within an organizational context, the characteristics of the organisation should be also considered (e.g., Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; Wicker & Hallmann, 2013). Referring to the theory of social action (Coleman, 1990), individual behaviour is also an outcome of the environmental conditions in which a person is socially embedded. Accordingly, a multilevel framework to investigate how both the individual characteristics of members and the corresponding structural conditions

of sport clubs influence this commitment was developed. At the context level, structural conditions such as club-specific opportunity structures (e.g., sport offers, strategic orientations), and club-specific sociocultural references (e.g., maintaining tradition, sociability) may be relevant factors on member decisions. At the individual level, both socio-demographic factors (age, gender) as well as membership-related factors (member satisfaction, voluntary engagement, identification) are relevant to member commitment.

3. Method

The multilevel design for analysing the relationship of club structures and member action is characterised primarily by combining member and club data within a framework of type-related case studies. This requires a criteria-based selection of sport clubs in order to make a meaningful limitation to a few cases representing the whole range of sport clubs. The first step was to obtain club-specific structural data from club managers with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The next step was to gather individual-level data from club members in an online survey. The influences of both the individual and corresponding context level are estimated in different multilevel models based on a sample of $n = 1,699$ sport club members from 42 Swiss and German sport clubs. The response rate within the sport clubs varied from 5% to 30%, and all sport clubs for which less than 20 observations (responses of the members) were available are dropped from the analysis. The multilevel analysis grant an adequate handling of hierarchically structured data (e.g., Hox, 2002).

4. Results and Discussion

Results of these multi-level analyses indicated that the commitment of members is not just an outcome of individual characteristics such as strong identification with their club, positively perceived communication and cooperation, satisfaction with their sport club, or voluntary engagement. It is also determined by club-specific structural conditions: commitment proves to be more probable in rural sports clubs and clubs that explicitly support sociability. Furthermore, cross-level effects were also found between the context factor sociability and the individual factors identification and commitment.

Overall, it becomes clear that the – theoretical and empirical – multilevel perspective is an important tool for conceptualizing a general “theory of the club”. However, context-specific orientations propose structural differences that, in turn, can specifically affect the individual behaviour of club members. Multilevel analysis is an appropriate method to gain a clearer picture of the context effects conceptualized by theoretical models and to implement them statistically. In addition, this method is able to disclose relationships at different levels that would remain undetected in conventional analyses. Therefore, the use of this method can strengthen sport management research by helping us to gain a deeper understanding of individual behaviour or decisions within sport

organizations.

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