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## A glimpse into the experience of a youth sport tourism consumer: an analysis of parents vs. coaches

Eric Hungenberg<sup>a</sup>, Tommy Aicher<sup>b</sup> and Taylor Sawyer<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Health and Human Performance, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN, USA; <sup>b</sup>College of Business, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO, USA; <sup>c</sup>School of Sport & Exercise Science, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, USA

### ABSTRACT

The newly coined ‘sport-cation’ nature of youth sport is multifaceted, complex and under-researched. Given the scholars’ desire to provide actionable implications to sport practitioners, it was necessary to examine the complementary roles that the tourism attractions, sport event elements and customer service encounters play in achieving memorable experiences for youth sport consumers. To ensure the generalizability of the study’s findings, 7399 responses were captured from coaches and parents attending travel events representing volleyball, softball, baseball and lacrosse. Results from structural equation modeling reveal key touchpoints and organizational tactics that directly and indirectly influence goals spectators’, event practitioners’ and destination marketers’ hope to realize through youth sport (i.e. event satisfaction, word-of-mouth and repeat visit). For instance, attendees identified lodging experience, tournament format and destination amenities as experiential elements most germane to the service marketing mix. For sport organizations, findings underscore the importance of cocreation, relying upon community support and recommendation when designing and executing a youth sport travel event.

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Although publicly subsidized sport programming still exists in many communities, nearly 90% of parents of youth athletes admit to investing personal finances in their children’s sport pursuits (Aspen Institute, 2020). In the USA, parents spend an estimated \$1000 per year; however, the club sport parent spends roughly \$2200, while more enthusiastic devotees report upwards of five figures. Interestingly, when family expenditures are parceled according to the expenditure type, expenses historically linked to youth sport participation fall considerably below others unrelated to the field of play. For instance, according to market reports produced from youth sport researchers (Aspen Institute, 2020; WinterGreen Research, 2019), it is not costs associated with equipment, registration fees or youth camps explaining youth sports’ economic growth, but rather expenses involving travel that often accompany club sport financing. Migrating away from community-organized and community-financed leagues that emphasized development and socialization, youth sport has

expanded its requisite needs to include heightened competition, state-of-the-art facilities, and perhaps most importantly, tourism amenities (Kaplanidou, 2010).

An affluent cost structure representative of the newly coined 'sport-cation' trend, reflects ways club and/or travel sport participation have reinvented organized athletics for teams. No longer are parents, coaches and players the only invested parties tied to effective sport offerings; youth sport in the twenty-first century now involves multiple constituents, all possessing vested interests in the economic and social benefits derived from it. Alan Kidd, president and CEO of the Sports Event and Tourism Association (formerly National Association of Sports Commissions) expounded upon the intricate evolution of travel sport in an interview with *Athletic Business* in 2017:

There was this genre of boomers who just felt that their kids weren't being educated and trained in sports in school, so they decided that Little League isn't working, and the school basketball league's not working. ... So, I'm going to take my little Johnny, who's a star, and we'll get out there and we'll start this tournament travel program. ... Now you're seeing this plethora of facilities, and they're cropping up everywhere. ... One, you have jobs, and two, you have development, which means big numbers. (Berg, 2017, para. 5, 7)

As sports commissions are discovering, this new youth sport model has positioned destinations well to leverage their tourism product portfolio to monetize the travel team's needs. This was evidenced by a destination located in the Appalachian Mountains reporting in 2017 one premier facility designed to induce youth sport tourism delivered \$35 million alone in economic impact to their county (Rocky Top Sports World, 2017). Sporting events targeting team sports, specifically, draw more athletes and family members that immediately stimulate an economy through monies spent at restaurants, hotels and other places of business. In addition to this, there is a prospect of inducing repeat visitation if the host destination delivers on a holistic sport tourism experience (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012). For these reasons, youth sport events are often more attractive to communities than those targeting older participants (Turco, 1997).

The 'sport-cation' nature of youth sport highlights significant opportunities for event right's holders and destinations, alike. Yet, the continued growth of youth sport travel, currently valued as a \$19 billion industry in the USA (Wintergreen Research, 2019), has created a very competitive arena where consumers have a vast array of events from which to choose. An overly saturated marketplace certainly warrants research aimed at developing practical frameworks to guide event practitioners to ways they may differentiate their sport travel experience while allowing destinations to utilize sport as a means of generating repeat visitation. Kaplanidou and Gibson (2012) attempted to assess how parents' perception of event image would influence attitudes toward the event and future behavioral intentions, but in this research, the methodology failed to dissect underlying reasons affecting parents' responses. Given the scholars' desire to provide actionable implications to sport practitioners, it is necessary to examine the complementary roles that the tourism attractions, sport event elements and customer service encounters play in achieving memorable experiences for youth sport patrons. The objective of this research, therefore, is to fill a void that would help stakeholders better understand how the youth sport consumer evaluates their experience and elucidate which underlying critical success factors are predictive of customer satisfaction and future behavioral intentions – outcomes relevant to both event organizers and destination marketers.

Among approaches used to address such objectives, Zeithaml and colleagues' (1988) service quality framework has revealed itself to be a valid and reliable method when examining service performance in areas relating to sport (see Byon, Zhang, & Baker, 2013) and tourism (see Baker & Crompton, 2000). While the framework is a well-established lens through which researchers examine consumer behavior, the relationships of service quality to customer satisfaction and satisfaction to repeat visitation have continually drawn criticism from scholars. The greatest limitation surrounding the service quality framework is the researchers' inability to implement both core and peripheral service attributes into the model that are reflective of the consumer context under study (Hume, 2008; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001). In other words, ambiguity in results is the product of not treating the sport tourism experience in an undifferentiating manner, or not delineating unique interactions that tend to define the context, and affect perceptions of performance, satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

According to Kaplanidou (2010), an attendee's event evaluation encapsulates myriad physical, social, environmental, organizational and distinctive characteristics encountered because of a sport tourism event. In this case, sport tourists' value hierarchy will likely be framed according to whether various service encounters, ranging from hotel hospitality to tournament facilities, support their sport travel disposition (Woodruff, 1997). If fund allocation is any indicator, it is likely the consumer's value perspective will not just include the core attributes surrounding the sport product, but the peripheral tourism experience as well. This calls attention to a management perspective in which event successes for both the supply and demand sides are reliant upon multiple constituents (Kaplanidou, Kerwin, & Karadakis, 2013).

Despite sports commissions' focus on marketing and development aimed at attracting youth sport patrons, little research exists demonstrating how the youth sport customer evaluates the core and peripheral service modules comprised of the holistic experience. Furthermore, there is little evidence as to which of the service elements may indirectly contribute to repeat visitation. Therefore, the goal of this research was to capture the evaluative responses of coaches and parents – identified as the core consumer of youth travel sport – in order to empirically support the marketing, event planning and executional phases of youth sport travel. To address the research purpose, we will first explain the sportscape framework as it has been applied across a variety of sport contexts. Next, we will outline factors directly associated with youth sport tourism and sport-cation variables which may impact the sportscape evaluation. We then discuss the hypothesized model, the relationships tested, and outline the potential differences between key youth sport consumers, coaches and parents.

## Literature review

### *The sportscape framework*

A breadth of research emanating from Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, and Eiglier's (1981) work suggests that the service experience encapsulates interrelated components such as interactions with employees, perceived outcomes of the service encounter and an event's physical environment (Gronroos, 1982; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991; Rust & Oliver, 1994). In the context of sport, such service characteristics became termed 'sportscape'

and represent a combination of factors helping frame customers' service quality perceptions. Examples include, but are not limited to, customer service, facility quality, vendor contribution and destination amenities. The sportscape framework has been applied in contexts such as intercollegiate sport (Hungenberg & Mayer, 2019; Yoshida, James, & Cronin, 2013), professional sport (Athanasopoulou, Skourtis, Zafeiropoulou, Siomkos, & Assiouras, 2012; Yoshida & James, 2011) and adventure sport (Hungenberg, Davies, & Bailey, 2019), all supporting the framework's ability to explain brand equity (Hungenberg & Mayer, 2019), repeat attendance (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2009) and destination image (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007).

Although spanning multiple sport domains, Shonk and Chelladurai (2008) note that service characteristics specific to a particular destination and sport context make generalizing findings from one event to the next difficult. However, when an event possesses regular occurrences, service quality factors can be isolated, with a focus being placed on understanding a particular element's effect on consumer behavioral intentions – more specifically, a customer's motivation to attend the event again. In the context of tourism services, Crompton (1979) parceled motivation into two forces: inward forces constituting wants and needs, and outward forces inciting actions to satisfy these needs. These forces work to create equilibrium. In the case of an event, satisfaction from an outward motivational force is realized when a customer begins to form an event image. This evaluation ultimately becomes a manifestation of both cognitive and emotional assessments emanating from the core product and interrelated experiences educed by the destination (Hungenberg, Davies, et al., 2019). It is in the process of reflecting on retrospective emotions that satisfaction, and ultimately repeat purchase, is realized (Funk, Jordan, Ridinger, & Kaplanidou, 2011).

Because of its manipulable relationships, service quality has emerged as an important area of attention among stakeholders; however, not all service features are valued equally, supporting the need to discern which may be impacting business performance outcomes most. For instance, in the sport tourism context, destination amenities often predict repeat purchasing behavior to a greater degree than event- and/or organization-specific features (Aicher & Newland, 2018; Newland & Yoo, 2019). Yet, participants (Hungenberg, Davies, et al., 2019) and spectators (Hungenberg & Mayer, 2019; Yoshida & James, 2011) have also cited an esthetic appeal of sport facilities when framing event quality, among other atmospheric features.

Consumer perceptions of the cocreative event process appear to be disparate according to the context in which sport tourism occurs. As youth sport tourism has largely been an overlooked area of study in sport management, this research may highlight interactive elements of the youth 'sport-cation' most meaningful in realizing destination marketers' and event organizers' goals. Moreover, this research may help destination marketers and event organizers best allocate resources in the planning phase of such events and establish marketing communication likely to resonate with disparate target audiences (i.e. coaches vs. parents).

## ***Confounding effects on sport event satisfaction***

### ***Weather***

The influence of weather on tourism is well documented. Turnbull and Uysal (1995) argued weather is a pull factor as travelers are brought to certain destinations because

of positive weather conditions. Destinations commonly capitalize on ideal weather conditions in marketing efforts (Mill & Morrison, 2009), a sound strategy as weather is considered as an important component of the destination image and marketing mix (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Pike, 2010). Although weather conditions can bring people to the location, they can also detract from the experience. Day, Chin, Sydnor, and Cherkuer (2013) evaluated four locations in the USA (San Diego and Vail, where weather is an important factor, and Chicago and Las Vegas, where weather is not as important) and found mixed results of the impact of weather on economic benchmarks associated with tourists. Measuring number of days with precipitation and hot and cold days, these variables had significant impact on some economic measures and no impact on others. Poor weather can have a deleterious effect on events attracting numerous tourists to a destination (Scott & Lemieux, 2010), and poor experiences caused by weather during an event can influence future participation or visitation (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2017). Giddy (2019) concluded canceling an event because weather did not influence future intentions but cautioned if weather cancellation becomes a trend for the event, it may.

### ***Competitive success***

Satisfaction is considered an attitudinal outcome from attending or participating in an event (Anderson, Fornell, & Mazvancheryl, 2004) and, thus, personal or competitive performance evaluations may influence perceived event satisfaction. Most research evaluating team performance has focused on spectators' evaluation of the event experience and influence of the on-field performance. Greenwell, Fink, and Pastore (2002) first established a positive team outcome had a positive impact on perceived event experience, whereas poor team performance negatively influenced evaluation. Yoshida and James (2010) posited the influence of team performance on event evaluation crosses cultural barriers. The influence of an individuals' performance in participatory sport has similar effects. Personal performance among marathon runners affected their overall event evaluation whereby individuals who achieved their goal rated attribute level and overall event level satisfaction higher than those who did not achieve their goals (Du et al., 2015). Furthermore, Du et al. (2015) determined personal performance also influenced future behavioral intentions such as returning to the event or destination. Scant research is available evaluating team performance in youth sport, and in particular, among stakeholders such as parents or coaches. Borrowing from participant and spectator research, it is feasible that the team performance may also influence event and destination evaluation.

### ***Officiating***

Sport officials (e.g. referees, umpires and judges) are an integral component of the sport event experience. Roles of sport officials are to maintain competitive fairness, ensure player safety and enforce game rules (Helsen & Bultynck, 2004). Officiating the sport event is a component of the process quality or 'the way the contest is organized, monitored, and controlled' (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008, p. 595). Thus, perception of the event's officiating may influence perceived quality of the event and influence return intentions. Most research evaluating the influence of sport officials on perceived event satisfaction has largely focused on spectator sport. Sport officials' performance during an event has potential to influence game outcomes and overall event experience (Dawson, Dobson,

Goddard, & Wilson, 2007). Biscaia, Correia, Yoshida, Rosado, and Maroco (2013) established the importance of officiating among spectators' perceptions of overall service quality; their results indicated officiating had a greater influence than the team performance and outcome quality. Little is known, however, about the influence sport officials have on perceived quality of youth sport events or that of sport tourists. It is feasible that similar outcomes are present among parents and coaches.

### ***Study purpose and conceptualization of the hypothesized model***

Unfortunately, a void in empirical research exists within the context of youth sport, forcing sport practitioners and destination marketers to apply heuristics to a domain that is growing ever more competitive and multi-faceted. Thus, the purpose of this study was to comprehensively examine parent and coach perspectives of the interrelated core and peripheral event attributes that form the continual service process. Through examination of multiple sport contexts and diverse sport tourism host locations, this study aims to highlight certain attributes' ability to achieve desired outcomes (i.e. customer satisfaction) for destination marketers and event organizers (i.e. WOM and repeat visit).

### ***Service quality and customer satisfaction***

The anticipated value achieved from tourism stems from the expectation that experiential attributes will augment underlying motivational dispositions pushing and pulling consumers to a destination (Woodruff, 1997). In sport tourism, the experienced value, or event satisfaction, is derived then from the service interactions encountered during both the core sport product (i.e. facilities, competition and format), as well as peripheral experiences occurring outside of sport (i.e. discover of tourism attractions and hotel hospitality). Although understanding how each customer assigns value to a service may be difficult, service quality research has generally been useful in identifying underlying desires shared among sport attendees by honing in on the critical success factors the foster event satisfaction (Hungenberg, Davies, et al., 2019). For instance, Cronin, Brady, and Hult's (2000) work suggested that intrinsic and extrinsic core aspects are often found to be positively related to satisfaction. If the same were posited among travel team attendees, value expectancies would be derived from the event's sport venue, tournament format and competitive field. Furthermore, the team or player outcomes would also become more salient, affirming the need to control for competitive success, inclement weather and officiating quality. However, other research tied service customer satisfaction to peripheral services, as these experiential elements are more likely to differentiate one service from another due to the increased perceived value they generate (Anderson & Narus, 1995). If for instance, parents and coaches are furthering their investment in sport for purposes of socialization and escapism, and these dispositions are best manifested through tourism attractions, nightlife or hotel hospitality, then peripheral service quality elements are likely to take precedent in the consumer value hierarchy. Because the destination and sport event both represent pull motives, which drive a travel team to a particular place and a particular time, the following hypotheses are postulated:

Hypothesis 1: Service elements associated with the core service attributes (i.e. tournament format, competition, facilities) will significantly impact parents' and coaches' event satisfaction.



Hypothesis 2: Service elements associated with the peripheral service attributes (i.e. vendors, online services, destination qualities, lodging) will significantly impact parents' and coaches' event satisfaction.

### ***Event satisfaction and behavioral intentions***

A preponderance of research has revealed satisfaction to be positively related to post-purchase behavior (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Keaveney, 1995). The same line of marketing research has also drawn associations between perceived quality and intentions following the purchase. As sport events can be used by destinations for purposes of destination marketing (Higham, 2005), it seems logical these relationships would extend to the behavioral intentions of sport tourists in the form of repeat visitation and word-of-mouth. Comparable to the way that all brands form an image, sport events possess attributes that become associated with the characteristics and benefits the destination offers to a tourist (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). It is based in this framework, the satisfaction emanating from a sport tourism experience will influence the subsequent evaluation of the trip and impact future intentions to return to the destination (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001).

In addition to increased patronage, another positive outcome linked to service quality is consumers' desire to advocate for the service provider. It is noteworthy that service consumers, to a larger extent than product consumers, heavily weigh opinions and experiences of other individuals before making purchase decisions (Hungenberg, Ouyang, & Gray, 2019), as service experiences often accompany greater risk than traditional products (Murray, 1991). Due to word-of-mouth (WOM) offering increased means of making an informed decision, ensuring attendees leave satisfied and with a positive image of the event is critical to the growth and sustainability of sport tourism services (Kim, Leong, & Lee, 2005). Thus, the following hypothesis framed the study's conceptual model.

Hypothesis 3: Among parents and coaches, the relationship between service quality performance and repeat visit will be mediated by event satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: Among parents and coaches, the relationship between service quality performance and positive word-of-mouth communication will be mediated by event satisfaction.

### ***Segmenting youth sport consumers***

The underlying question surrounding this research concerns the degree to which organizational, tourism, sport and customer service interactions affect destination (i.e. repeat visit) and organizational outcomes (i.e. brand equity). But scholars have warned against treating attendees as homogeneous (Green & Chalip, 1998). Group compositions, dynamics, needs and wants are likely to influence what is most meaningful to youth travel members (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012). Certainly, tournaments represent family vacations or getaways, placing parents in a central role for evaluating sport tourism destinations (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012); however, coaches who possess organizational and team goals may be applying disparate criteria in their choice evaluations. Segmenting responses according to team role is thus necessary, and in line with sport consumer behavior models classifying fans in typologies according to behavioral orientation



(Stewart, Nicholson, & Smith, 2003). One distinguishing factor between parents and coaches worthy of further discussion is parents' use of youth sport for socialization.

### ***Sportscape facilitating parent socialization***

Bean, Fortier, and Chima (2019) noted many parents use events involving their children as their primary chance to socialize. Although these situations are often seen in Parent Teacher Association activities, volunteering or daycares, the strongest formations are in youth sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Knight & Holt, 2013). At youth sport events, parents create a mutual purpose by coming together for one competitive goal, allowing for a deeper immersion into the event. Feelings of excitement and satisfaction are amplified as group members begin to mirror one another's reactions (Walker, 2010). Value may also be derived from excitement and happiness of being able to watch their children participate in competition (Johansen & Green, 2019; Knight & Holt, 2014). During these events, parents develop trust among other parents early on, and it is not uncommon for acquaintances to develop into close relationships (Brown, 2014). In these relationships, the responsibility of demonstrating social connectedness may become prevalent to parents as they realize their children value similar social understanding and responsibilities (Edwards, Franklin, & Holland, 2003) and reflect similar behaviors and patterns (Coleman, 1997).

When social success becomes a large factor behind motivation to participate, sport participation and leisure activities begin to blend (Dagkas & Quarmby, 2012). For example, during competitive sailing events, parents socialize at the yacht club, being served alcohol and food (Schmitt, Atencio, & Sempé, 2020). These events are highly social and serve as a highlight for sailing parents, as it is a chance to be distinguished while achieving an enhanced level of social success. Schmitt et al.'s (2020) work illustrated how fundamental ancillary experiences to the sport product are in shaping a memorable youth travel experience for parents. Consequently, it is likely parents may value elements of the 'sport-cation' that facilitate socialization as much as they value aspects augmenting the tournament. Therefore, we explore the following research question via the data analysis.

Research Question 1: Is parents need for socialization supported by their evaluation of peripheral sportscape elements.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Events representative of 'sport-cations' were identified with assistance of a prominent youth sport organization located in the USA. The selection of events was based upon criteria established by event organizing groups that positioned the event as a premier youth travel experience. Such criteria would include revenue generation, nation-wide team attendance, extension entertainment or coinciding attractions (destination amenities or major sport event), to name just a few. All events were produced by nationally recognized organizations and were hosted by major metropolitan cities and/or vacation destinations located in the USA (i.e. Myrtle Beach, Park City, Phoenix, San Diego). The diversified sport

events under study captured age groups ranging from <10 to 18 years, and were all designed, according to the event organizers, to 'attract the family members of the participating athletes'. In summary, each participating event was scrutinized and intentionally selected based upon its ability to meet the study's contextual purpose.

Upon identifying events, directors were asked to disseminate the online questionnaire on the researchers' behalf. The survey link was posted on the event organization's webpage, official social media accounts, and in post-event emails. A total of 10,687 complete responses were captured; however, 30% of attendees identified as a local team. Given the purpose of the study was to explore the multifaceted nature of a team's sport tourism experience, only non-local responses were used in the analysis ( $n = 7399$ ). A 50-mile standard – a common criterion for economic impact studies examining incremental spending – was used to determine the non-local status (Vander Stoep, 2005). The sampling frame consisted of two volleyball ( $n = 827$ ), one lacrosse ( $n = 81$ ), 11 baseball ( $n = 3459$ ) and 10 fastpitch softball ( $n = 3032$ ) events.

Consumer responses were then segmented based upon their association with the team. This was necessary according to youth sport organizations suggesting that parents and coaches represented the two primary target segments within the club/travel marketplace, and therefore, should be the focus of the study. Among non-local respondents, nearly 70% of participants were parents, 24% were coaches, and remaining responses came from team administrators or other supporting roles; no youth players participated in the study. Parents and coaches revealed, on average, their travel team participated in just over six events per year ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = 9.10$ ). Additional descriptive information concerning the parent and coach sampling frame is provided in [Table 1](#).

## **Measurement**

In the conceptualization phase of the study, several focus group sessions were held to identify factors that would comprehensively capture service quality encounters experienced by an event attendee. Focus group participants included 12 youth sport event directors operating in four different sports (volleyball, baseball, softball and basketball). This process not only rendered the study's sportscape framework, but also informed control variables and outcome variables most salient to youth travel sport practitioners. The subsequent paragraphs detail operationalization of variables included in the path model (see [Figure 1](#)).

The study's sportscape questionnaire was adapted from measurements previously validated in service quality research conducted in sport (see Athanasopoulou et al., 2012; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002; Yoshida et al., 2013; Yoshida & James, 2011). Its eight constructs, measured with 16 items (minimum of two items per construct) included event format, facility maintenance, vendor quality, online service technology, customer service, competitive field, lodging experience and destination amenities. Items were framed according to respondents' degree of agreement with statements. Examples of each construct and their respective reliability value are illustrated in [Table 2](#).

Three additional variables were identified by focus group members that would need to be controlled for in the model due to potential impact on an attendee's evaluation of sportscape constructs. Inclement weather, for instance, can negatively influence an event's format and deter a visitor's ability to experience destination attractions (Day

**Table 1.** Team profile information derived from parent and coach segments.

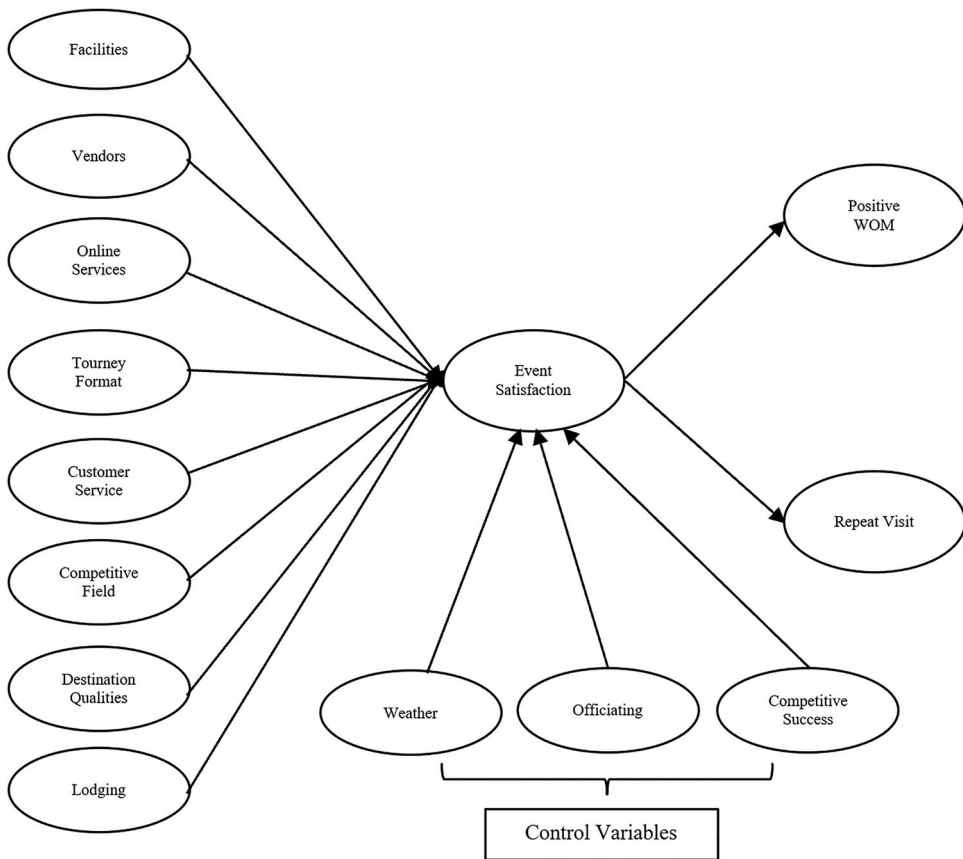
Demographic variable	Parent (n = 5044)		Coach (n = 1788)	
	N	%	N	%
Team competitive status				
Elite-level travel	2474	49.3	799	44.9
Mid-level travel	2207	44.0	842	47.3
Low-level travel	309	6.2	127	7.1
Recreational	26	.5	12	.7
Age division				
10u	386	7.6	228	12.7
11u	441	8.7	183	10.2
12u	674	13.4	317	17.7
13u	648	12.8	250	14.0
14u	1069	21.2	338	18.9
16u	1072	21.0	292	16.3
18u	784	15.0	180	10.1
Sport event type				
Baseball	2235	44.3	941	52.6
Fastpitch Softball	2041	40.5	752	42.1
Volleyball	725	.9	32	1.8
Lacrosse	43	14.4	63	3.5
Method of hearing about event				
Web search	2199	43.6	948	53.1
Friend	562	11.2	214	12.0
Telecommunication from Event Org.	150	3.0	96	5.4
Other teams	1742	34.6	399	22.3
Email Marketing from Event Org.	382	7.6	131	7.2

et al., 2013). This effect was captured with one survey item. Similarly, a tournament team's experience can also be impacted by the perceived quality of officiating and a team's competitive success (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008). Officiating and competitive success were each measured with two items. Both control variables demonstrated adequate reliability per Chronbach's alpha values of .84 and .71, respectively. All control items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Consistent with other published research (see Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012; Prayag & Grivel, 2014), customer satisfaction was measured with a single item and represented how closely the event's price and quality of the tournament experience matched (1 = Very Dissatisfied; 2 = Dissatisfied; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Satisfied; 5 = Very Satisfied). Equally,

**Table 2.** Examples of measurement items and their respective reliability values.

	Example of Measurement Item (1 = Strongly Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)	Reliability (α)
Facility Maintenance (FM)	Overall, the facility staff did an excellent job of keeping the tournament site clean	.76
Vendor Quality (VQ)	On-site vendors fully met team and spectator needs	.75
Online Services (OS)	The online services available on (organization's) website are informative and easily accessible	.80
Tournament Format (TF)	The format of the event (e.g. game guarantee, bracket, collegiate exposure, etc.) was well thought out and executed proficiently	.79
Customer Service (CS)	During the event, I found (organization) staff to be effective communicators	.80
Competitive Field (CF)	The quality of competition faced made for a successful event	.79
Destination Amenities (DA)	The physical setting (e.g. beautiful landscapes, attractions, safety, atmosphere, etc.) provided a desirable location to travel to compete in sport	.81
Lodging (L)	The lodging choices were located in convenient proximity to event-related needs	.72



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model.

attendees' intentions to exhibit positive WOM and repeat-visit the destination were also measured with one item and a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Definitely Not; 3 = Unsure; 5 = Definitely).

## Analysis and results

Multigroup structural equation modeling (SEM) was chosen as the study's primary data analytic procedure because it allowed to simultaneously test direct and indirect relationships identified in the hypothesized model. In addition, multigroup SEM permitted a test of comparison between parent and coach perspectives. Prior to performing SEM, Q-Q plots were examined using the SPSS 26 to affirm the assumption of multivariate normality. Based upon diagonal patterns identified among all variables in the hypothesized model, non-normality concerns were not found. Additional descriptive and bivariate inference statistics are provided in Table 3. All variables correlated significantly at  $p < .01$ , and mean values ranged from 3.18 (Vendor Quality) to 3.86 (Competitive Field).

Goodness-of-fit statistics for the model demonstrated its adequacy,  $\chi^2(44, N = 5044) = 46.199, p < .001$ , CFI = .95, NFI = .94, RMSEA = .081. Apart from the chi-square test, which is often misleading when applied to large samples (Bagozzi, 1981; Bentler & Bonett, 1980),

**Table 3.** Correlations, mean values and standard deviations (SD) of the variable used in the structural model tested in this study.

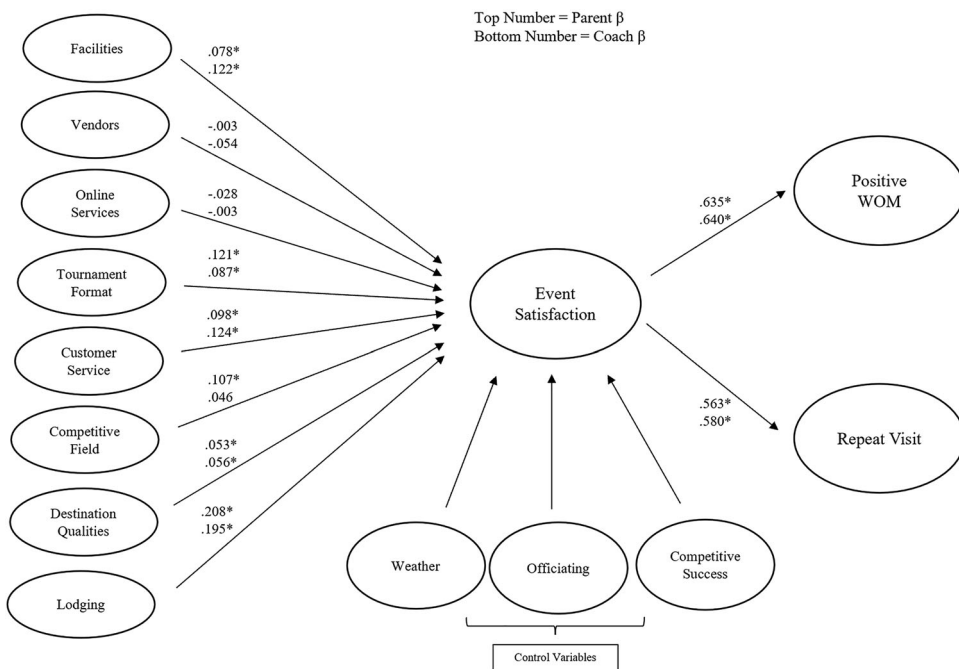
	FM	VQ	OS	TF	CS	CF	DA	L	RV	WOM	ES
Facility Maintenance (FM)	1										
Vendor Quality (VQ)	.510**	1									
Online Services (OS)	.442**	.314**	1								
Tournament Format (TF)	.542**	.310**	.498**	1							
Customer Service (CS)	.651**	.395**	.539**	.598**	1						
Competitive Field (CF)	.529**	.312**	.408**	.584**	.534	1					
Destination Amenities (DA)	.213**	.141**	.152**	.161**	.176**	.167**	1				
Lodging (L)	.153**	.127**	.122**	.134**	.147**	.158**	.482**	1			
Repeat Visit (RV)	.359**	.192**	.241**	.376**	.375**	.401**	.321**	.446**	1		
Positive WOM (WOM)	.397**	.219**	.280**	.421**	.423**	.418**	.297**	.387**	.799**	1	
Event Satisfaction (ES)	.348**	.196**	.236**	.352**	.353**	.351**	.247**	.331**	.571**	.637**	1
Mean	3.70	3.18	3.83	3.56	3.61	3.86	3.82	3.39	3.70	3.67	3.15
SD	.89	.99	.79	1.06	.91	.86	.89	.93	1.01	1.09	1.04

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

each fit index fell within standards widely espoused in the literature (see Kline, 2016). A statistically significant chi-square test also supported the need to parcel coach and parent responses,  $\chi^2 (13, N = 5044) = 27.209, p = .012$ .

Figure 2, as well as Table 4 illustrates standardized estimates associated with each of the model's path relationships. In examining results, controlling for confounding effects discussed in the literature review proved to be necessary, as weather ( $\beta = -.129, p < .01$ ), officiating ( $\beta = .06, p < .01$ ) and competitive success ( $\beta = .121, p < .01$ ) were each impactful on parent and coach event satisfaction. Nearly, all variables in the model impacted parents' satisfaction ( $R^2 = .27$ ), and in turn, intent to return to the destination ( $R^2 = .32$ ) and speak positively about the event ( $R^2 = .40$ ). Only vendors and online services were not statistically significant among parents. Coaches exhibited similar responses, albeit to different degrees. In addition to online services and vendors, coaches did not deem the competitive field influential in dictating whether an event met their value expectation. Like parents, the sportscape model did have a large effect on coaches' value expectations ( $R^2 = .27$ ) and intent to engage in positive WOM ( $R^2 = .41$ ) and repeat visitation ( $R^2 = .37$ ).

Lodging, evidenced by its regression weight of .21 and .20 for parents and coaches, respectively, exceeded the effect of other variables in the model to explain event satisfaction. Second in degree of impact, tournament format was significantly influential in dictating a coach and parent's sport tourism experience. These effects, combined with the significant relationship between destination qualities and consumers' event satisfaction, reinforces the role peripheral experiences have on parent and coach outcomes.



**Figure 2.** Model results.

**Table 4.** Results from structural equation model.

Model	Parents				Coaches			
	Event satisfaction	Positive WOM	Repeat visit	SE	Event satisfaction	Positive WOM	Repeat visit	SE
Direct								
Athletic Facilities	.078*			.020	.122*			.038
Vendors	-.003			.014	-.054			.028
Online Service	-.028			.019	-.003			.036
Tournament	.121*			.016	.087*			.029
Format								
Customer	.098*			.021	.124*			.036
Service								
Competitive	.107*			.019	.046			.035
Field								
Destination	.053*			.015	.056*			.031
Qualities								
Lodging	.208*			.015	.195*			.030
Event		.635*	.563*	.012		.640*	.580*	.017
Satisfaction								
R <sup>2</sup>	.272	.403	.317		.272	.410	.336	
Indirect	Parents				Coaches			
Athletic Facilities		.049	.044			.078	.071	
Vendors		-.002	-.002			-.034	-.031	
Online Service		-.018	-.016			-.002	-.002	
Tournament		.077	.068			.055	.050	
Format								
Customer		.062	.055			.079	.072	
Service								
Competitive		.068	.061			.029	.027	
Field								
Destination		.034	.030			.036	.033	
Qualities								
Lodging		.132	.117			.125	.113	

\* $p < .01$ .

Although elements of the tournament experience were not among top-performing predictors in the model, parents and coaches recognized the importance of service characteristics germane to the core tournament experience. For instance, parent responses revealed athletic facilities, customer service and a competitive field to be influential when determining a tournament's value. Perceptions of athletic facilities and customer service played an even larger role for coaches (see Table 4), yet a competitive field was not a significant predictor of a tournament's value – an unexpected outcome of this research. Overall, the degree to which parents' and coaches' value expectations were met had a large effect (see Cohen, 1988) on positive WOM and intentions to patronize the destination. Only partial mediation could be supported following a bootstrap confident interval analysis of indirect effects on WOM and repeat visit, however, with lodging demonstrating the most impact for both.

## Discussion

A breadth of research in sport management has focused on antecedents to market demand. This empirical work, occurring in professional, collegiate and participative sport has undoubtedly served as a useful guide for practitioners by elucidating how consumer-perceived influences and/or expectations toward service products are formed



(Zhang, Lam, & Connaughton, 2003). Moreover, this line of work emphasized experiential elements both directly and indirectly associated with the core sport products that affect attendees' conative loyalty. Yet, generalizations across sport contexts can be deceiving. In fact, Cianfrone, Zhang, Pitts, and Byon (2015) noted youth sport tournament environments may require unique considerations compared to other sport contexts. One reason for this is the parents' desire to use youth sport as a conduit for socialization, or to build friendships with other parents of players on their team (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012). Another is the desire to couple a child's sport pursuit with a family vacation, suggesting destination amenities may play a larger role in value expectations established by youth club sport consumers. Such complexities surrounding meanings consumers apply to youth sport tourism inspired this investigation. Findings may shed light on the multifaceted, holistic experience parents and coaches are thought to value from a youth travel sport event.

Unquestionably, parents' financial, time and emotional commitment to their children's sport endeavors make them a key customer segment among youth sport event organizers (Schwab, Wells, & Arthur-Banning, 2010). However, the belief experiential assessments hinge solely upon their child's, or the team's, performance may be oversimplifying travel team parents' goal orientations. This supposition was supported when, after controlling for performance, the sportscape model explained 27% of variation in parents' and coaches' satisfaction with the tournament experience. The model's ability to explain parents' and coaches' satisfaction is consequential to both event organizers and host destinations, given customer satisfaction's partial mediation of respondents' positive WOM and revisit intentions. Previous research suggests a consumer's positive event experience can affect desire to return to the destination (see Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Osti, Disegna, & Brida, 2012); however, this study is the only one to the authors' knowledge highlighting specific facets of an event that attract, satisfy and create repeat visitation in a youth travel event context.

Among sportscape dimensions, parents' evaluations of lodging experience and tournament format were the most pervasive predictors. On the surface, these event-related touchpoints may not seem related; however, Shonk and Chelladurai's (2008) seminal work provided insight into why these variables facilitate a more integrated sport travel experience. According to the authors, the hotel occupied by a sport tourist encourages two fundamental experiences for guests. The first references a hotel's ability to foster interactions with other guests, which can affect one's quality evaluation. Parents and coaches, through lodging, may capture socialization by establishing a place for commiserating, blowing off steam, enjoying food and drink, and recreation. These forms of interaction, particularly among individuals who share common interests, are likely to facilitate social bonds. In fact, close-knit relationships formed during a sport tourism experience can lead to nostalgic memories of the event and firmly establish sport social groups (Fairley & Gammon, 2005). Because hotels provide a natural environment for social interaction among parents, this experiential touch point remains a critical facet in the youth sport tourism scape.

Hotels also provide added tourism benefits due to their proximity to destination attractions, dining amenities, parks and historical points of interest (Arbel & Pizam, 1977; Latiopoulos, 2020). Distance traveled to and from the sport venue can be reduced, which is a critical success factor among sport tourists (Bernthal & Sawyer, 2004). Understanding the

role location plays in guest satisfaction, event organizers and destination marketers are obligated, then, to facilitate any experiential opportunities that may augment the core product. Strategically identifying lodging partners in collaboration with destination marketers would help achieve this. Also, focusing pre-event communication on directing teams to preferred lodging partners for reasons of increased access to destination amenities and sport facilities is equally critical to meeting sport tourists' value expectations.

Lessons such as this coincide with previous research suggesting events that attempt to create differentiation based upon location or accompanying attractions only realize extension benefits if they are experienced by visitors (Hungenberg, Davies, et al., 2019; Taks, Chalip, Green, & Kesenne, 2009). This may also explain why tournament format played a prominent role in coach and parent event assessments. Like a hotel's proximity to attractions may allow for or deter ancillary leisure activities, so too will an event's schedule. For instance, a beach destination hosting a youth sport event is likely to lure participants due to the prospect of an afternoon of leisure comprising sun, sand and relaxation. An event schedule that monopolizes the time of participants, parents and coaches may prevent realization of that expectation, ultimately manifesting into a dissatisfied visitor. Therefore, when formalizing tournament schedules, event organizers should be cognizant of extensions that played a role in a youth travel team's registration decision, as these experiential elements are equally, if not more, important in facilitating customer satisfaction, positive WOM and repeat visit.

Though the aforementioned suppositions bring attention to the importance parents and coaches place in complementary elements surrounding an event (i.e. destination qualities, lodging), results of this research reveal youth sport consumers' attentiveness to aspects of the core product. For instance, parents and coaches illustrated quality of athletic facilities was meaningful in their event assessment. Service quality research has long understood atmospherics and facility/interior design to be instrumental in consumers visiting wineries (Pan, Su, & Chiang, 2008), retail (Ali, Mubarak, & Shameem, 2017), and college football (Hungenberg & Mayer, 2019), to name a few. This study adds to this literature emphasizing the role clean, well-maintained sport facilities play in youth sport consumers' satisfaction and subsequent behavioral intentions (i.e. WOM, repeat visit).

Although antecedents to a satisfactory youth travel event were consistent among parents and coaches (albeit to different degrees), one factor exposed a significant difference among the two, providing an interesting finding for the research question. Parents, rather than coaches, cited a competitive field – quality of competition faced and degree to which the competition created a memorable tournament experience – as critical to a satisfactory youth travel event. In Shonk and Chelladurai's (2008) model of service quality in sport tourism, contest quality is emphasized, with perceived quality of the opponent providing high-quality entertainment for spectators. For parents, a competitive field may incite added intrigue via rivalry, an opposition team's prestige or novel representation, denoted by teams attending from other parts of the country. A unique competitive landscape may insinuate a brand position that differentiates local from travel tournaments.

Two control variables in the model also significantly influenced event satisfaction, which creates challenges for event organizers. Event organizers cannot control weather, for instance, but response to poor weather conditions is an important consideration, as event satisfaction is diminished among participants when weather responses fail to meet attendees' expectations (Giddy, 2019). In addition, continued poor weather could

ultimately lead to lower repeat intentions; if event timing or location has a higher probability of poor weather conditions, considering relocation or a different event schedule may be warranted. Similarly, event organizers cannot control teams' competitive success, but it will inevitably affect attendees' emotional response to the event. To best minimize this effect, event organizers must ensure competitive matchups are fair and aligned with skills and abilities of different teams. This would set teams up for potential success, or at least hopefully give them the ability to meet their performance expectations. Additionally, quality of officiating also impacts event satisfaction. Event organizers should employ properly trained and experienced sporting officials. Though there still may be error among officials, if they are perceived as fair, balanced and competent, perceived quality of officiating will likely be enhanced (Dawson et al., 2007) and thus influence overall event satisfaction.

## Conclusion

Youth sports travel is a growing sector in an amateur sport tourism market that accounted for \$45 billion in USA spending in 2019 (Sports Events and Tourism Association, 2019). However, empirical research is limited in the sport management and tourism literature, relegating strategic management of youth sport to heuristic approaches. To reduce this theoretical void and aid the industry in developing best practices, this research sought experiential evaluations of consumers comprising youth sport travel clubs to better understand the ways sport facilities, lodging accommodations, destination attractions and event organizers interact.

Findings reveal key touchpoints and organizational tactics that directly and indirectly influence goals spectators, event practitioners and destination marketers hope to realize through youth sport. First, hotel and other lodging accommodations appear to play a significant role in parents' and coaches' tournament experience. Although causation cannot be claimed from this study's design, it is possible that lodging may be a setting that allows parents and coaches to build rapport and establish friendships through common interests and shared experiences.

Future research should explore youth sport parents' desire to use their child's participation to foster relationships among other parents. Sport sociologists may also be invested in knowing how this motive may interact with levels of parental pressure placed on children's performance outcomes. Additionally, lodging evaluation was significantly correlated with destination amenities and repeat visit. The relationship found among these variables highlight the cruciality of event organizers working closely with conventions and visitors' bureaus when promoting prospective event partners.

Results also emphasize municipality support of local facility maintenance and development for purposes of growing youth sport tourism. Return on investment has been a common topic of debate among community constituents, as local taxpayers juxtapose financing facilities that support economic impact with realizing citizen interests. Disagreements on this matter have even spearheaded increased privatization of amateur sport facilities; however, the effect facility quality had on a visitor's perception of the event and place, evidenced by their likelihood to return, empirically supports destinations' decision to invest in sport facilities, particularly as this infrastructure meets both local and non-local needs.

Although the context of youth sport represents a contribution, this study also adds to a line of research advocating destination marketing organizations continue to use sport as a vehicle for tourism development and differentiation. For sport organizations, findings underscore the importance of cocreation, relying upon community support and recommendations when designing and executing an event. Despite limitations, our sample size achieved a diverse response that could increase the generalizability of results, providing implications across a vast array of youth travel events.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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