Not Your Typical Fan: A Phenomenological Study on Booster Club Membership for a Men's Division I College Tennis Program

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Abstract

This transcendental phenomenological study was focused on a NCAA Division I tennis team booster club and eight participants' experiences of reality versus expectation regarding booster involvement. Team identification is an attachment that provides fans with a sense of belonging (Delia & James, 2018; Heere & James, 2007). This study used the social identity theory as the theoretical lens to better understand how the booster club members identify as a social group and the relation to team identity and brand equity. Multiple themes emerged from the data, including reciprocity, investment, and connection and belonging. Each of these themes fell under both reality and expectation but, were experienced differently under the two categories. The invariant essence emerged as a desire for purpose and engagement with the team and athletes. The importance of connection to team identity was clear, and implications for marketing the booster club to enhance team identity and brand equity are discussed within.

Introduction

The financial challenges faced by college athletics have remained persistent (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2019). In an effort to justify the existence of big-time college athletics, which provide exposure and other economic benefits to universities, institutions of higher education have looked to their associated athletic departments to become financially self-supporting (Dwyer, Eddy, Havard, & Braa, 2010; McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; McEvoy, 2005; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008). As such, athletic departments have relied on alumni and boosters for donations to avoid funding deficits (Kim et al., 2019).

As Power Five athletic departments pursued lucrative payouts related to men's revenue sports, they have been financially incentivized to move away from any non-revenue sports (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003). While Title IX generated some protection for women's sports, any non-revenue sport remains vulnerable. General university funds used to subsidize an athletic budget, known as athletic institutional support, allowed for reduced financial strain on individual programs (Stinson, Marquardt, & Chandley, 2012; Weight & Cooper, 2011); however, decreased institutional support, donor support, or revenue production prompted budget deficiencies which depicted the highest influence for athletic directors confronted with sport elimination decisions (Weight & Cooper, 2011). As such, men's college nonrevenue generating sports have suffered from program elimination, budget deficiencies, gender equity implications, departmental emphasis of athletic success, and regional sport popularity (Weight & Cooper, 2011). Weight and Cooper (2011) recommended coaches attempt to understand why athletic directors eliminate nonrevenue generating athletic programs in order to develop strategies and

maximize sustainability efforts. For example, teams supported by lucrative donors and active fans were unlikely to suffer program elimination (Weight & Cooper, 2011).

College sports have acted as the glue that binds alumni to the university (Markus, 2018). Sport has exhibited the ability to connect people of different cultures, races, and genders; acting as conversation starters between strangers at a bar and fueling a friendship among coworkers in an office. These external groups, when properly fit with team identity, have bolstered team loyalty (Heere & James, 2007). Booster clubs have demonstrated one way to appropriately align external groups with team identity thus increasing team loyalty. Further, booster clubs for college athletics have generated opportunities for financial support, with the potential to provide a revenue stream for non-revenue sports.

The majority of university donation research has utilized a myopic framework of organizational success and individual traits of donors, hindering research and scholarly progress (Ko, Rhee, Walker, & Lee, 2013). As such, this study aimed to provide a better understanding of a booster club and its members' team identification, loyalty, and overall support for a team without a winning record in a Power Five conference. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of booster club members in a NCAA Division I Power Five university in the southeastern United States for a men's tennis team.

Review of Literature

Identification

The social bonds shared by a group of friends are included in one's identity (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). A group identity is based on a number of factors: public and private evaluation, interconnection, interdependence, involvement, and awareness (Heere & James, 2007). Social relationships and group membership allow individuals to advance and alter their self-concept and experiences (Lock & Funk, 2016). Furthermore, with multiple in-group identities consumers are able to maintain both individual and in-group roles in sport fandom.

Individuals form social connections to teams through brand equity, the recognition and value of one brand over another, a central construct for identifying purchase preferences and consumer loyalty (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). A group of brand admirers (i.e., a fanbase) who engage in social interactions are included in a social brand community; individuals acknowledge their membership in the group and engage with each other through various means (Carlson, Suter, & Brown 2008). In fact, Carlson and colleagues suggested the strength of an individual's relationship with a social brand community predicts a stronger commitment to the brand itself.

Sport consumers belong to various small groups and each group membership contributes to behavior and experiences (Lock & Funk, 2016). Upon researching the impact of individuals belonging to subgroups inside the primary group, the researchers found that consumers specifically choose the social relationships and subgroups in which they participate. Prior research has established a relationship between team identification and psychological health (Wann, Hackathorn, & Sherman, 2017). Sport game attendance, characterized as a social activity, increases perceptions of support and sense of belonging in older adults (Inoue et al., 2019). Wann et al. (2017) found one's fandom and identification can promote a sense of belonging. Similarly, Inoue et al., (2019) revealed identification with a local team provides older adults access to emotional support opportunities, and the perception of emotional support from

other fans strengthens one's sense of belonging. When designed and managed correctly, sport has fostered socialization and community development (Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012). Pickett, Goldsmith, Damon, and Walker (2016) reported both social support and sense of community have the ability to increase one's self-efficacy.

Team identity

Through psychological attachment, team identification provides fans with a sense of belonging to a larger social structure (Delia & James, 2018; Heere & James, 2007). High team identification positively influences athletic event attendance (Katz, Ward, & Heere, 2018). Furthermore, identification with a team influences a number of other variables including sociability, psychological health, and brand equity (Lock & Funk, 2016). Delia and James (2018) indicated the exact meaning of *team* remains contextual, consisting of many micro-level components, including attachment to players, coaches, and the community. Team identity, reinforced through sociability (Heere & James, 2007), is included in the *social identity theory*, a psychological theory based on group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity represents part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from their knowledge of belonging, or membership, to a social group and the value, or emotional significance, attached to that membership (Heere & James, 2007). Social identity describes one's identity based on the relationship between the person and their surroundings, while disregarding the part of the person's identity that comes from personal attributes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Sociability, defined as a drive state or an inherent need for collective involvement (Melnick, 1993), may result in a social or team identity. Social identity can be adopted with both the knowledge of belonging to the group and an emotional attachment to the group (Heere & James, 2007). As such, sociability has aided brand equity by increasing associations with and attachment to a team's community.

Donors

Bühler and Nufer (2010) found a strong fanbase contributed to athletic success, and the development of successful relationships with potential fans contributed to a strong fanbase. Booster clubs are used to generate excitement for upcoming athletic seasons (Vilona, 2013). Alumni form social identification through an appreciation for team history (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Accordingly, alumni represent individuals predisposed to be of higher interest to become booster club members.

Limited community resources create a funding challenge for university teams and athletic departments (Hoch, 1999). The need to produce adequate funding has compelled teams compete for donors. Futhermore, individual sport booster clubs has produced inequitable spending among teams (Anderson, 2017). While this might be an issue, it also created opportunity for each sport to establish relationships with booster members and increase funding.

Athletic success

Prior research indicates athletic donations correlate with athletic success (Martinez, Stinson, Kang, & Jubenville, 2010; Stinson, 2017; Stinson & Howard, 2007). Athletic success generates a stronger influence on institutional donations over independent academic or athletic donations, alumni donors over general population donors, and Division I FBS universities over Division I non-FBS institutions (Martinez et al., 2010). Athletic success has a higher influence on donor giving at universities with lower levels of academic prestige (Stinson & Howard, 2007). For

example, football success has largely impacted donor giving at Division I universities (Martinez et al., 2010), specifically football bowl game appearances have generated new athletic donors (Stinson, 2017).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of booster club members in a NCAA Division I Power Five university in the southeastern United States for a men's tennis team. Men's nonrevenue generating college athletic programs suffer from program elimination, budget deficiencies, and departmental emphasis of athletic success (Weight & Cooper, 2011). This study aimed to explore the lived experience of booster club members as a strategy to maximize sustainability efforts, because teams supported by lucrative donors and engaged fans were less likely to undergo program elimination (Weight & Cooper, 2011). Without revenue such as concession and ticket sales, booster club membership provides an opportunity for a team to increase their budget. This study explores the experience of joining the booster club and the experiences of continued membership. The study was driven by one primary research question with two sub questions.

1. What are the experiences of booster club members at the NCAA Division I Power Five institution in the southeastern United States?
    1. What are the expectations of belonging to the booster club?
    2. How do the expectations described align with the reality of the booster club membership?

Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of joining a Power Five Conference tennis booster club. Findings of qualitative research provide a detailed picture of a select group of individuals' experiences and deep understanding of the topic studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Use of phenomenology allowed the researchers to focus on an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of booster members, using participant-centric contextual and temporal influences (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). The primary researcher believes that a better understanding of this phenomenon may benefit the specific booster club under study, as well as others like it, to obtain additional membership. Understanding the experience of those who have already joined may allow the coaching staff and executive board to better recruit and serve potential new members.

Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach was used for this study, as this method is the most appropriate for the research questions being asked. Those utilizing this method are interested in understanding the participants' subjective experience of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). While there are multiple interpretations for analysis available within phenomenological research, the researchers agreed to utilize transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) to analyze the collected data. According to researcher, transcendental phenomenology requires a systematic analysis and requires the researcher to abandon preconceived notions about the phenomenon being investigated. The participant becomes the primary source of knowledge, and their first-person experience exposes the details of the phenomenon. Using phenomenological reduction, the data is further reduced to the essence, or central meaning, of the experience.

Participants

Eight individuals participated in this study. All participants were current booster club members for the tennis team (see Table 1), and all participants were between 42 and 81 years old. Of the eight participants, three identified as male and the other five identified as female. All participants identified as Caucasian. The participants of the study indicated household incomes over $150,000. This demographic data indicates that the sample is homogenous, and appropriate for phenomenological methods. Participants chose a pseudonym to protect personally identifiable information.

Researcher reflexivity

The primary researcher grew up with tennis as an integral part of her life. She began competitive play in middle school, ultimately advancing to a top 10 ranking in the state and top 150 in the South before committing to a Division II university for a tennis scholarship. As such, her experiences in the tennis world influence her understanding, coding, and findings by belonging to the social structure being studied (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout her masters, the primary researcher worked as an intern for the university's athletic marketing department, and she is currently a certified tennis official. These personal experiences will influence how the primary researcher conceptualizes and engages in the interviews with participants and the meaning ascribed to each transcript (Maxwell, 2013). In order to minimize the impact of personal biases, the researcher utilized self-check through reflexive memoing, as well as peer debriefing with the research team throughout the research process. One of the members of the research team was not involved in the interview process and acted as an external auditor throughout the coding process.

Data Collection

After approval was granted by the institutional review board at a Power Five university, a network of booster club affiliated key informants was contacted to initiate participant selection. Upon meeting with participants, the researcher reviewed risks and benefits of participation, confidentiality and its limits, and the voluntary nature of the research. Each participant signed and received a copy of the informed consent document.

A semi-structured interview guide was the primary tool for data collection, as it allowed for a flexible and fluid interview process (see Appendix B). This ensured that each interview covered the same general information while still allowing each participant to describe their experience in a conversational manner, without the rigidity of a predetermined list of questions. Semi-structured interviews are a useful tool for phenomenological inquiry, as they allow patterns and themes to emerge naturally from the description of the lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview questions were formed with the primary research question in mind.

Eight participant interviews were conducted in person. Initial interviews were audio-recorded and lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews were transcribed and de-identified, and each transcript sent back to the respective participant for member checking. Brief follow-up interviews were held at the convenience of each participant to allow for any additional clarification or additions to the data.

Establishing trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of this study is demonstrated through thorough documentation of the data collection process. It is important to accurately portray the data without distortion. This was done though descriptive validity, peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checks to make sure the descriptions are as accurate as possible (Maxwell, 2013). The primary researcher's detailed notes of interviews documented descriptive validity. Thorough documentation of data collection and analysis, descriptive accounts of the participants' experiences, and a clear framework of researcher biases and assumptions helps to ensure credibility of the data. Once the data has been accurately described, it is important to interpret the data correctly. Member checks, which involved returning interview transcriptions to the participant to ensure correct representation of the data, will ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Three experienced qualitative researchers individually coded the data prior to meeting to discuss and compare codes and ultimately interpret meaning within the data. In qualitative data analysis, the use of multiple coders reduces latent biases by allowing researchers to share their interpretations, or sense-making, of the data (Ravitcha & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016). Theoretical validity will use the social identity theory as a framework for the study.

Triangulation, or the collection of information from multiple sources and methods, was used by the researchers with analytical theoretical triangulation (Maxwell, 2013). This involves understanding the back and forth between theory and data as well as the discussions held by the research team to compare meaning-making of the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016). The researchers will show triangulation though the use of social identity theory and the data provided by participants along with discussions among the research team. The primary researcher will also engage in conversations about the data, while maintaining amenity required, with peers who are not included on the research team.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began when the research team started organizing and thinking about the data (Ravitcha & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016). While conducting interviews, the primary researcher took notes of interesting, important, and repetitive responses. Throughout the study, the primary researcher utilized journaling to document her experience to address issues of establishing productive relationships (Maxwell, 2013). After the first interview, the primary researcher decided to include an additional question about awareness in the following interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, the digital recordings were transcribed verbatim utilizing a transcription service. Next, the research team began to pre-code, or read, and engage with data from the transcripts (Ravitcha & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016).

A transcendental phenomenological approach includes the assumption that there is an invariant essence to every shared experience (Patton, 2015). To uncover the essence the researcher team must undertake the process of *phenomenological reduction* (Moustakas, 1994). First, the researcher team, prior to the inclusion of all evidence, bracketed personal and theoretical knowledge through the process of epoché, a Greek term that translates to "a suspension of judgment" (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Bracketing one's own judgment allows room to view the phenomena through the lens of the participant rather than clouding the experience with the assumptions or bias of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Next, the researchers engaged in the process of *horizonalization* by valuing every participant statement with equal importance (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers then identified invariant pieces of data across transcripts,

and from these developed clusters of meaning, which later developed into themes (Patton, 2015). Next, the researchers examined these clusters of meaning and utilized *imaginative variation* to explore all possible underlying factors that may have accounted for the structural description of an experience – that is, the meaning and context behind the textural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description involves the reflection of experience, such as feelings of vulnerability; it provides content and illustration, not essence (Patton, 2015). The phenomenological analysis next requires structural synthesis, where the researchers examine the profound meanings for the involved group of participants (Patton, 2015). Finally, the researchers *synthesized* both textural and structural experiences of all participants that were involved in the study, and arrived at an invariant essence (Moustakas, 1994).

The researchers utilized the qualitative software, Quirkos. This allowed researchers to highlight data and assign codes that can be easily accessed with all transcripts. The research team read each transcript multiple times throughout the coding process. The primary researcher comprehensively read and coded each transcript multiple times to become completely immersed in the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016). The research team met regularly throughout the process to compare findings and important codes in the data.

Throughout the study, the primary researcher continued to journal and record memos throughout the data analysis. The purpose of journaling was to accurately document the thinking process of the primary researcher. This reflexive process can also be used to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the completed study.

Findings

Findings emerged into two distinct categories, likely driven by the research questions – expectations and reality. Under both categories, the themes of *investment, connection and belonging*, and *reciprocity* emerged. However, the expectations and reality of the lived experience appeared differently within each category. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of themes and their key components within each category.

Expectations

Participants described expectations of what they anticipated being a booster club member would be. They each noted that an investment of time and energy was expected to one degree or another, although some expected less than others. They also each idealized and placed expectations around situations in which the team and fanbase were connected and interacting with each other. Finally, the expectation of reciprocity was held primarily around material benefits – the acquisition of team "swag" such as blankets or hats with the team logo.

Investment. Members shared an expectation of investment, to one degree or another. Investment may be financial or personal time and energy and, could involve investments in friendships within the club or investments toward the team. For example, PM shared, "I'd been involved in tennis my whole life, so when we moved [here], the very first thing I did was to reach out to [the coach], and ... and we developed a friendship." The investment in friends who are also in the club may be a part of what keeps individuals participating.

Tracy shared that often the idea of being involved was a passing comment, but she had never followed through. She was not aware of the existence of the booster club initially, and when she finally did join, she was unsure of what the commitment would entail. She stated:

> You know, to be honest, I don't know if I really knew there was a booster club in a sense until… You know, it never was just kind of out there. So, I don't really remember, I think someone just asked and so I did it… I find that kind of common with other friends too. Because I would ask somebody and they would say, "yeah", and they never get around to it, and then, you have to remind them. I mean it's just kind of on the back burner in terms of just doing it and making the commitment. So, I have not been a booster club member for very long.

Ken shared a different experience. His family was involved in the booster club before him, so he was somewhat aware of the commitment and investments expected. He rolled into the position as his wife became increasingly invested:

> My wife was very involved with tennis, as were my son and daughter, and they actually ... first, it was my wife that was a member of the booster club, so I was helping out. She was a member, but whenever they needed volunteers when she was a member of the booster club, I became part of that too, and then as she became more involved and became a board member, I really got involved. And as her time kind of took up with other activities, her job and everything, I kind of just rolled in and they asked if I would be on the board then, and I said yes.

Although expectations differed from member to member, it did appear that each member expected some type of financial, emotional, and time investment to be required of them as they joined.

Connection and belonging. Club members placed a strong emphasis on the expectation to connect with others and have a place where they feel they belong. This social aspect of the data reflected various points of connection, such as connection to the sport, connection to the team members and coaches, and connection to the community and others within the booster club. Carrie painted a picture of her favorite tennis experiences and the connection found within:

> An ideal tennis experience is when you go and it's standing room only. Perhaps there's been some sort of a get together ahead of time where you've mixed and mingled with people you haven't seen in a while, and you're playing a team that it's going to be a very competitive match and it comes down to the last court and you win, and everybody is screaming and hollering and it's just the perfect night, and everybody stayed. You didn't have people leaving maybe after the doubles point. But maybe someone who doesn't always win the deciding point wins and it's just the perfect night. To me, that's a good night.

Ken also spoke to the importance of the social interaction, publicizing the matches and creating a sense of community at each match to facilitate connection between fans. He stated:

> I think the ideal is when there is good information out there so people will know about it. And there's things happening during the match, not just at ... between the doubles and singles, but during the match, and kind of engage people. Tennis is a long sport out there. Those matches can go a long time. Fans, you may lose their attention and stuff,

so like that barbecue that's going on, people can go up, they can come down, get a barbecue, go back out, watch some more of it. So, it's kind of created a festive atmosphere. :

Katheryn pointed out the benefits of connecting with the players and having a small enough booster organization so that everyone knows everyone else:

The nice thing about the tennis teams are the teams are small enough that you can get to know the players, whereas if it's ... And you don't have a huge booster organization. The basketball team has a huge booster organization. Even softball has a really big booster organization. So, it's harder as an individual to get to know the players, but we get to interact with the players in mixers and events.

Reciprocity: Material benefits. Most participants mentioned the expectation of benefits, particularly material benefits, of belonging to the booster club. Ken mentioned the team "swag" that was often given out:

We get a free gift, if you will. A hat, or a ... you know, a ... a lot of our matches early season are very cold, so it might be a blanket, or different things like that, and that's nice. It's kind of fun to support your team that way. But to be honest, that's not why you do it. They're nice benefits, I guess, but they aren't so nice as to be, I would think, attractive to anybody who is not going to be a fan anyways to be honest.

Similarly, Mary Lou noted that she expected members of the team to deliver her gift, and that she enjoyed having the opportunity to interact with them. She stated:

If you've joined booster club, the team brings you, you're happy or whatever every year and it's so cute. Guys are the cutest ever. They're always so polite. They come to your door then bring it, like personally bring it as busy as they are. The time or maybe two of them will, you know, they divide and conquer.

Katheryn reflected this same sentiment; "you usually get some sort of gift for being a booster. Not every year, but some years team members come to deliver it, or the coaches come deliver it, so that's always a nice touch." It was apparent that club members enjoyed receiving these tokens of appreciation, but placed additional importance on interacting with the team and coaches in some way during this time. Most stated that after belonging to the club for a while they expected some type of team interaction in return for the various investments they made toward the team.

Reality

The reality of being a booster club member was reflected in this category. The themes continue to overlap but, are portrayed differently here than within the expectation's category. Members note that investment was not too different from the expectation, however the time and involvement necessary for success was large. The connection and belonging theme was split into two subthemes of *connection with the team* and *connection with other fans*. While connection with fans was present, participants struggled to feel genuinely connected to the team and players. Finally, the reality of reciprocity was reflected not in the material benefits but in the times that participants did feel that connection with players and former players.

Investment. All members were asked to invest in the team, much as they expected. Financial and emotional investment were both required, along with a heavy investment of personal time. Alan noted that in his time as club president he invested a great deal of time and energy into the teams:

> [Another booster] had been president I think for maybe five years before me, and then they asked me to be president, and my main purpose was to put more butts in the seats. I thought we did a good job of supporting the team, getting involved with the team, getting to know them personally and within NCAA rules, we did a great job of providing them with what they needed … Involvement, involvement, involvement. I mean, and it's something that you can't wait to be invited in, you have to be involved. You have to seek involvement. If you wait to be invited in, you probably don't belong there anyway.

Ken spoke to the importance of learning about the players and knowing the fanbase, which he saw to be an important piece of his involvement and emotional investment toward the team. He said:

> I have to take the initiative to learn about the players, where some of the more casual fans, they don't, and in tennis, nicknames are huge, so we'll have nicknames for all the players, and a lot of times, a fan will go, "Who is that?" Because they'll be yelling the nickname, and then you'll tell them, "Well, that's so-and-so over here and this is their nickname and why we're saying it." But that has to be done by the fan. They have to take that initiative versus the team kind of promoting some information out.

Connection and belonging. The booster members' reality of belonging was not always congruent with their ideals. They desired to feel connected with the team as well as the fanbase and other boosters, but some did not feel that this need was met by the team or coaching staff. This theme was broken into two subthemes: *connection with the team*, and *connection with other fans.*

Connection with the team. The participants made clear that access to and interaction with the team was important to them. PM shared awareness that there were team access events available to club members:

> I think they do a lot of team access events. We've actually never attended any of, like, the booster dinners. But they do, like, events with the boosters and the team, where they get to ... where boosters get to mingle and interact with the team. They do a lot of, like, with the family and kid's stuff. I think [the coach] is accessible and open. And obviously his communications and so on.

While access events were held, some participants felt irritated that the team members still did not know them by name or by sight. Katheryn expressed her frustration:

> Quite frankly, the guys should know who I am because of [tennis academy], and I bet you none of them do… Even if they don't know my name, they should know my face… They need to make more of an effort to connect with their fan base.

The effort put forth to connect was common throughout participant interviews. Alan noted that while some teams consistently tried to interact with the fans and club members, others did not, and this inconsistency became problematic. He stated:

I think involvement with the community is paramount, and that's something that the girls [tennis team] had tried to do on a consistent basis for so many years. So, the guys [team] do it one season, don't do it the next season. Do it one season, don't do it the next season. Consistency is what we need to have in that respect.

Connection with other fans. Connecting with the fanbase and others in the booster club was an additional piece of importance for the participants. They wanted a place to feel involved and welcome, where their families could interact with one another. PM mentioned that by attending these events her children became friends with families who were close to the team, allowing them some special privilege:

It's a fun family event. So, I mean, the kids, they love coming. Again, now they know [the coach's] kids and they play in the green room, and I mean, I guess they have special privileges that maybe not everybody who comes here has.

Carry spoke to the idea that getting to engage with new people kept the ideas fresh and energy flowing. She emphasized that connecting with others through serving the team was an important part for her:

I think that people always want to help and they always want to support the coaches and support the team, and so really loyal people want to serve in that way. You get on the committee and you just try to plug in to a place where you can help out. It's always nice to see fresh faces who want to plug in because I've been on it for a long, long time, and Martha ... People have been on there for years and years and years, and it's nice to see fresh faces, not only because we get old, but because fresh faces have fresh ideas and it's always good to have new ideas and new energy.

Reciprocity: Player connection. Participants placed a large importance on service to the club, but also on what they got out of serving. The material benefits were minimal, but the interactions with team members and the coaching staff made the experience important to the boosters. For example, Alan stated:

The benefit is what I see in the kids. I mean, that's the only reason I'm here. There are really no material type benefits from being a member of this club. It's all supporting the kids out there, watching them grow, not only as players, but also as individuals. Being able to advise them. I've got, probably this last week I had four ex-players call me up ... ex-players, and ask me my advice, business advice, life advice, you know, those kind of things. Getting involved with those players I think is my reward.

Similarly, Ken spoke to this same concept and the reward he takes from his interactions with and support of the players:

Yeah, it's ... you know, the student-athletes, they're working their rear ends off on both academics and their sport, and they just ... kind of going out and giving a hand, letting them know there's people in their corner, and just ... even if it's bringing food for fans at a match, there's more fans out there, they get feeling better about the long hours they're putting in by seeing full seats and everything, so yeah, I enjoy it a lot.

Discussion

The lived experience of belonging to the booster club revealed three themes, reciprocity; connection and belonging; and investment, which emerged within both the initial expectations and experienced reality of booster club members. Each of these themes highlighted important needs and desires of the members and led to an understanding of how the participants experienced their membership. The overlap between the two, as shown in Figure 1, resulted in the invariant essence of the experience. These themes and the invariant essence pave the way for future implications.

Team identity represents an individual's association and attachment to a team and can be built through the social identity theory (Heere & James, 2007). The social identity theory describes an individual's identity based on group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As Heere and James (2007) articulated, social identities are assumed once an emotional attachment to a group is associated with the knowledge of belonging; in the current study, participants accepted booster club membership as a social identity through their financial and emotional investments included in their expectations and reality of booster club membership. The financial investment in the team indicates a knowledge of group membership; and the anticipation of personal time, energy, and social investments suggests an expected emotional attachment to the group.

The first research question addresses the expectations of belonging to the booster club, and the second research question centers on how the expectations align with the reality of the booster club membership. Participant expectations included personal investments, emotional connections, and acts of reciprocity. Sport marketers can promote overlap in expectations and reality by emphasizing the booster clubs purpose and providing engagement opportunities (see Figure 1). Booster members expressed philanthropic motives, which is the main purpose of the club. In return for their service, booster members desired access to engage with players and coaches.

Personal investments included financial, emotional, and time commitments to the team. The financial investment expectation, advertised by the team and required for membership, was also an experienced reality of participants. Participants expected to invest emotionally through developing friendships with the coaching staff and supporting the student athletes. Boosters took the initiative to learn about the players, which suggested emotional investment was also a reality of booster club membership. The final personal investment, emerging from the data, was time. Participants expected financial and emotional investments, however were not expecting the extensive investment of personal time. Personal time was donated through board positions, meetings, and researching players to better form connections.

Team identity can provide the social bonds shared by a group (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). This concept is addressed in the literature by defining team identification as an attachment that provides fans with a sense of belonging (Delia & James, 2018; Heere & James, 2007). Team identification is imperative as the strength of one's relationship with a brand (team) is suggested to predict stronger commitment to the brand (team) itself (Carlson et al., 2008). The connection and belonging theme showed a strong expectation and desire to connect with others and have a place where they belong. These included connections to the sport, team, coaches, community, and other booster members; however, some participants felt their desire for connection was neglected by the team or coaching staff. The feeling of neglect can lead to lower team identification, lowering team loyalty and attachment.

Strong relationships produce successful sports sponsorships and sport organizations should proactively work to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders (Nufer & Bühler, 2010). Similar to the sponsors mentioned above, club members expressed the importance of relationships with team members and coaching staff. The largest discrepancy between expectation and reality is conveyed through the reciprocity theme. Participants mentioned "swag" or physical materials as the expected benefits of membership; however, participants showed a desire for relationship development and service opportunities. The material benefits were of minimal importance; many participants found the interactions with the team members and coaching staff to be the true benefit to club membership. Utilizing relationship over transactional marketing would reveal the opportunity for team interaction. This would increase accessibility to potential new members similar to the participants in this study.

Invariant Essence

After examining the emergent themes around the lived experience, the researchers arrived at the invariant essence of the phenomenon. At the crux of investment, reciprocity, and connection and belonging appeared to be an urgent sense of purpose and engagement (see Figure 1). All participants wished to be involved, connect with other fans, and feel as though they held a purpose within the organization. At the same time, they deeply desired a genuine connection with team members and coaching staff.

Implications

There are multiple implications that stem from the findings of this study. Primarily, the marketing for the booster club likely needs to change in order to acquire more members and to market the desired components. Booster club members perceived themselves differently than typical fans. They wanted to invest in the team and support the players as individuals on and off the court. As such, sport marketers should generate content to capitalize on the loyalty and dedication of the booster club. Currently, there is not a traditional marketing foundation for booster club membership at the university. The membership application is placed in a trifold pamphlet and set out at every tennis club in town. At the matches there are pamphlets displayed on a table next to the season's booster club gift. Based on the results of this study booster club members want to invest in, connect with, and give back to the team. Booster club members first joined the club not because they saw the pamphlet at their tennis club or at the matches, but instead because someone asked them to join, emphasizing the idea that in order to attract new booster club members, the marketing of the club may do best when it is active and includes a social connection. This social marketing builds upon the idea of social identity theory, increasing the team identity and brand equity.

Marketing the investment of the team will allow potential boosters to see the difference each person can make. The team looks to booster club members to help gain fan interest though various social events. Additionally, the booster club members watching the matches are able to individually support each player by knowing who they are and addressing them by name. As tennis is an individual, or sometimes dyadic sport, the players like to hear personalized words of encouragement to show they are recognized for their hard work and dedication. The booster club members are then able to help new fans learn about the different players and create connections of their own. This type of involvement again ties back to the importance of team identity and sociability in marketing practices. The participants in this study all mentioned the importance of investing their time, energy, and finances into the booster club so that they could

also feel a part of the team. When this happens, they are likely to continue their support and encourage others to join.

The innate investment of booster club membership drives the desire for connection with the team. As the booster club members are often the biggest fans of the team, the participants expressed a desire for interaction and access to the team. While there are some opportunities for this interaction, such as a preseason meet and greet with the players, additional opportunities would help to build a greater team identity and strengthen brand equity. These opportunities should be advertised to potential boosters as a benefit of membership.

Overall, the participants expressed that helping the college athletes and watching them grow was rewarding. Simply displaying membership pamphlets next to the free gifts does not demonstrate the true benefits of booster club membership, nor does it tap into the benefits of team identity for the potential members. Marketing of membership should show the intrinsic rewards of team identity and connection through serving the athletes, rather than the extrinsic rewards of small material gifts.

Future Research and Conclusions

This study is limited to one university, one booster club. Apart from belonging to only one booster club, the participants in the study represented boosters that were highly involved with the team. Future research should include all levels of involvement in booster club membership. Future studies should examine a larger study including tennis booster clubs from a large sample of universities in a conference. A quantitative study on booster club membership would be beneficial to allow a generalizable understanding of booster club membership. A future study should be completed on the same university to analyze if the recommended changes are successful.

There is a discrepancy in what the expectations and the reality of booster club membership. The marketing of the club towards extrinsic rewards does not work with the clubs target population. While members appreciated the gifts, many stated the gifts is not a reason to join the club. When asked about the membership gifts the participants expressed more excitement of the players delivering the gifts. The participants of this study expressed the importance of connecting with the team and helping the team grow. In the future, the booster club should be marketed utilizing typical marketing practices such as social media, and the message should focus on investing in the players and giving back to the team.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Mrs. Marla	81	Female
PM	42	Male
Ken	55	Male
Tracy	55	Female
Mary Lou	59	Female
Kathryn	60	Female
Carrie	66	Female
Alan	67	Male

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Tennis Marketing (1)

Name of interviewee: _____

Date: _____

Preliminary Script: "This is [name of interviewer]. Today's is [day and date]. It is _____ o'clock, and I am here in [location] with [name of interviewee], the [title] of [institution or system]. We'll be discussing [topic of interview]."

1. Tell me about your first memory from tennis? And what is your favorite memory from either playing or watching tennis?
   - When did you first start playing?
   - When did you first start watching tennis?
2. Can you remember your first University X tennis match?
   - What made you decide to come support?
   - How did you learn about the match?
3. What kept you coming back? Can you tell me about why you decided to be an University X tennis booster?
   - When did you first join Club?
   - Do you currently, or have you ever held a board position? I so what was it?
   - Can you tell me about your experience in that position?
4. Can you tell me about your current experience as a Club member?
   - What benefits do you enjoy?
   - In your opinion, what can be done to improve the experience?
5. About how many matches do you attend throughout a season? Do you ever travel to support the team?
   - How do you typically find out about the matches?
6. Where do you typically look to find out about match dates and times?
   - Have you ever realized the men played a match and you did not know about it?
7. What would be your prefered way to know about matches?
   - Would you like reminders on match days?
8. In your opinion, can anything be improved to influence you to attend more matches?
   - Awareness?
   - Marketing promotions?
9. In your opinion, does the men's tennis team connect with their fans?
   - If yes: sense they are already connecting with fans, can you think of anything that needs to improve to raise Club membership?
   - If no: Do you think if they were able to connect with their fans more, would that help improve the Club membership?
10. Are there any marketing promotions, like tshirt throws, food night, or international night, that impact your decision to attend the match?
    - What promotions are your favorite?
    - Do you feel any promotions are a waste of money?
11. Can you explain an ideal tennis experience from your perspective? This could include anything from how you find out about a match, to marketing techniques used, to the social experience?
12. Is there anything I haven't asked you yet, that would help me understand your experience as an University X tennis fan?
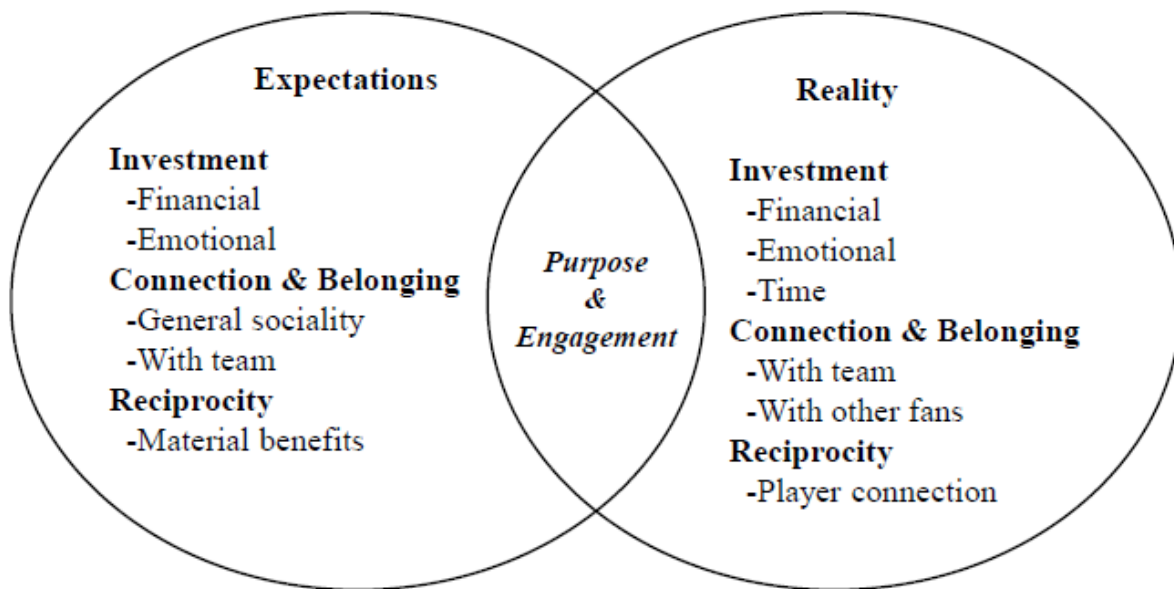
Appendix C

Figure 1. Emergent themes with key components for each category, and invariant essence