

**Youth Sport Spectating among Parents During the COVID-19
Pandemic**

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant changes to family life and youth sports activities around the globe. In efforts to promote continuity and youth participation in sports, and in lieu of risks for spreading the virus at competitions and games, the youth sport environment adapted to meet emerging health and safety protocols. The cancellation of youth sports and shifts to virtual spectating (i.e., watching children play sports online) were often enacted to protect families, yet little is known about how these changes physically, socially, and psychologically impacted parents and the family system. In response, we conducted a mixed methods study to explore the lived experiences of parents of youth sport participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This novel and exploratory research discovered several shifts in the physical environment of youth sport, including challenges with technology and limitations in the number of spectators at youth sporting events. Findings also revealed an array of psychosocial experiences among parents including feelings of grief, frustration, and sadness due to restrictions and sport cancellations, as well as fewer child-parent interactions and a diminished connection to sport in response to virtual spectating. We developed a conceptual model of how shifts in the youth sport environment influenced parent spectators. Our findings have important implications for practice and inform future areas of research regarding youth sports and the family system.

The landscape of youth sport changed in unprecedented ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most noticeably, children and families across the United States witnessed the cancellation of youth sport practices and competitions, adjustments made to sport spectating rules and regulations, and differential protocols for their return to play (Pierce et al., 2020). In response to these changes and others, scholars voiced concerns about how shifts in access and participation in youth sport influenced a myriad of outcomes including children's physical activity (Dunton et al., 2020), social skill development (Kelly et al., 2020), and mental health and well-being (Elliot et al., 2021; Fegert et al., 2020). Further, researchers advocated the cancellation of sports and certain adaptations potentially influenced children's relationships with coaches and peers (Kelly et al., 2020), as well as the parental support and family connections afforded through sport (Elliot et al., 2021).

Despite the importance of exploring the pandemic at the intersection of youth sports and children's health, few studies explored how changes in youth sport during the pandemic directly or indirectly influenced the experiences of parents and families. This is of importance given the role youth sports can play in shaping family dynamics and child-parent interactions (Blom et al., 2013; Jeanfreau et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2016). To demonstrate, scholars argued parent and family engagement in children's sports, including spectating (watching children play sports), provided a forum for

communication with children, a context for spending more time together as a family, and opportunities to connect with other families in the community (Dorsch et al., 2016; Trussell & Shaw, 2012). However, recommendations set forth by The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2020), ranged from disallowing or limiting the number of spectators to promoting safety through physical distancing and mask wearing, likely changed how children, adolescents, parents, and families experienced youth sports during the pandemic (Pierce et al., 2020). Several recommendations further encouraged youth sport organizations and coaches to move competitions and spectating opportunities to virtual (online) platforms when accessible or appropriate (CDC, 2020). For families and child athletes alike, the COVID-19 pandemic was the first-time youth sports spectators experienced a virtual context and did so on a global scale (Kelly et al., 2020).

The effects of cancellations and virtual spectating on parents and families are relatively unexplored in the youth sport literature making it a novel area of research inquiry. Weed (2020) argued the COVID-19 pandemic presented scholars with opportunities to examine how sport tourism promoted social connections and bonds, and how proximity to spectating influenced connection and well-being. Kelly et al. (2020) identified gaps in understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the family system. These efforts built upon the research of Dorsch et al. (2020) as related to the examination of sociocultural

components of parent engagement in youth sports. This study sought to fill an important gap by exploring the physical (direct) and psychosocial (indirect) experiences of parents and families participating in youth sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessing and gaining insight from these stakeholders in the youth sport setting was both crucial (Kelly et al., 2020) and novel, due to a paucity of literature on spectator experiences during pandemics. The study also provided a platform for future research on family experiences and variables impacting the family system in the youth sport environment.

Review of Relevant Literature

Youth sport is a major economic and social industry (Intrado, 2019) with over 50% of youth in the United States participating in team sports (The Aspen Institute, 2019). As a result of such high participation rates, scholars extensively used a systems lens to understand how children and families experience the youth sport setting (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). From a theoretical perspective, Dorsch and colleagues (2020) argued the youth sport system is influenced by the integration of environmental, team, and family subsystems. The environmental subsystem is comprised of organizations, communities, and societies; the team subsystem is comprised of child athletes, peers, and coaches; and, the family subsystem is comprised of a child athlete, parents, and siblings (Dorsch et al., 2020). Importantly, the environmental subsystem reflected the design and

delivery of youth sport, as well as the norms associated with and meanings ascribed to sport participation (Dorsch et al., 2020). When examined together, these three subsystems are theorized to impact a child athletes' behaviors, attitudes, experiences, and outcomes in youth sport.

Within the model proposed by Dorsch et al. (2020), the family subsystem aligned with the family systems perspective; a central theoretical framework in understanding mezzo-level interactions among child athletes, families, and their social environments. According to family systems theory, an individuals' functioning is determined by a person's place in their family system and factors such as emotional demands, role definitions and expectations, boundary issues, culture, and belief systems (Watson, 2012). Bremer (2012) noted central tenants of family systems theory that align with youth sport included family boundaries and stressors. Boundaries operate on a continuum from disengaged to enmeshed and are shaped by the family's level of involvement in sport (Hellstedt, 1987). Disengaged families have little personal involvement with one another through sport. In contrast, enmeshed families are heavily involved and attached to the sport experience. Family systems theory provided a conceptual framework for understanding the involvement of parents in sport often defined as underinvolved, appropriately involved, overinvolved, or extremely involved (Dorsch et al., 2019; Hellstedt, 1987).

Family systems theory further theorized children and families participating in sport experience horizontal and vertical stressors (Bremer, 2012). Horizontal stressors arose during expected and unexpected transitions such as beginning to specialize in one sport, being cut from a team or having a season-ending injury. Vertical stressors are psychological issues (e.g., grief, mental illness) and patterns that families developed including their expectations, attitudes, and taboos related to sport participation (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Of note, when horizontal and vertical stressors intersect, the potential for conflict is greater, and it is harder for a family to successfully function (Bremer, 2012). At the mezzo-level, it has been suggested that inappropriate or negative parental involvement may be the result of parents or family members struggling to cope with stressors in the youth sport environment (Harwood & Knight, 2009; Knight et al., 2009). For example, researchers argued parental behaviors are interrelated to stressors and present themselves both emotionally and behaviorally in sport settings (e.g., anger, sadness, yelling, etc.), especially when parents witness an injury or see a dangerous play (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Gould et al., 2008; Omli & LaVoi, 2009).

At the micro-level, the youth sport system also influenced child-parent relationships and in the context of the pandemic, researchers must change how studying the youth sport environment was approached (Kelly et al., 2020).

A predominant focus of youth sport research has been on parents' supportive functions. Studies showed parents are often involved in their children's sports by serving as supporters, coaches, managers, interpreters, role models, and providers of opportunities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Knight et al., 2016). Furthermore, scholars conceptualized parental support as tangible, emotional, informational (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), or behavioral such as giving encouragement and performance-contingent feedback (Holt et al., 2008). Emotional support often came from both parents and is defined as the provision of security and comfort to the child athlete during stressful times in the sport (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Tangible support from parents included financial support and transportation, whereas informational support consisted of general, noncoaching advice, such as advice on how the child athlete could balance sports and other areas of life (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

The forms of support offered by parents can positively or negatively affect a child athlete. Positive perceptions of support from parents are linked to children's enjoyment and enthusiasm, autonomy, and self-perception of sport skill (Dorsch et al., 2016; Gagné et al., 2003, McCullagh et al., 1993; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986). Parents often demonstrated support through warmth and a positive affect, as well as by cultivating a climate of mastery (Dorsch et al., 2016). Further, studies

showed providing support and parental involvement is mutually beneficial for parents (Trussell & Shaw, 2012) and this can occur publicly as a spectator or privately within the family home. Wiersma and Fifer (2008) found parents experience joy when watching their children and when interacting with other families in the community.

In contrast, perceptions of pressure from parents stemming from spectator behaviors can result in maladaptive outcomes. Gould and colleagues (2008) found pressures from parents in youth sport settings can result in children's discontent with sport performance, performance anxiety, and negative affect (Dorsch et al., 2016; Gould et al., 2008). Pressure is often communicated via conflict and a negative affect from parents, along with reinforcement of an ego climate (Dorsch et al., 2016). The aforementioned studies demonstrated how central parents are to the youth sport system, and how changes to the sport environment have the potential to impact child-parent relationships and family functioning. The Aspen Institute (2020) estimated due to the pandemic, an estimated 30% of youth would terminate youth sports participation and likely not return to play. Given the centrality of the family in youth sports, it is important to further explore how family dynamics are impacted by youth sports and diversify the approaches to examining these relationships (Knight, 2019), especially given the inevitability of long-term changes to the sport environment as a result of the pandemic (Kelly et al., 2020).

Parent Spectating and COVID-19

Within the framework of family systems theory, a growing body of research begun to focus on the spectator behaviors of parents involved in youth sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013; Reynolds, 2021). Studies focused on observing parent behaviors such as aggression and anger (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008), connecting sport-based behaviors to parenting practices (Trussell & Shaw, 2012), measuring parent spectating behaviors (Omli & LaVoi, 2009; Reynolds, 2020, 2021), and developing educational initiatives and interventions to address spectating behaviors (Dorsch et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2021).

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic altered the lives of parents involved in youth sports in multiple ways. Physical and direct changes to the youth sport system were environmental and relational dependent upon venue rules and regulations, as well as local, state, or national public health policies (CDC, 2020). Youth participants lost on average 6.5 hours of sports participation per week (Solomon, 2020). In some states, sports were canceled entirely, whereas in other states and regions, sport leaders and coaches offered virtual spectating opportunities to parents and family members to meet social distancing requirements. In these instances, virtual spectating experiences were brought to parents and family members through live streaming services and other online platforms. Limited research focused on the prevalence of shifts to virtual spectating during the pandemic and the

efficacy of technology use within the youth sport domain. Rather a majority of scholarship examined virtual spectating in the professional sport domain.

The ability to gather and enjoy sports in unison with others is increasingly important to sport spectators. Weed (2008) found sport spectators value the ability to gather, watch, and engage with virtual sporting events in close proximity. The proximity to other spectators helped to create a shared mutual experience that allowed for the creation of memories associated with sports (Weed, 2007). Furthermore, Dixon (2014) examined how the emotional responses of sport spectators influenced their viewing experience. Dixon (2014) posited the emotional responses associated viewing sporting events are a source of cultural continuity and stability for sport spectators. Considered together, the environment in which spectators view events could influence their emotional responses and feelings of attachment to sports.

Within the youth sport domain, less is known about the extent to which environmental changes, new rules, and health regulations indirectly influenced the psychosocial experiences of parents and families. Pierce et al. (2020) surveyed parents, coaches, administrators, and child athletes during the pandemic and found the one area of adaptations associated with the pandemic that stakeholders *did not* want were sporting events with no spectators. Despite these data, parents and families experienced limitations in their ability to attend

events, creating opportunities to examine how, if at all, spectating adaptations influenced parents and families. Dorsch et al. (2019) found coaches reported parental absence at sporting events resulted in stunted learning, burnout, and defiant behavior among children. In contrast, when physically present, coaches perceived parents to be meaningful sources of encouragement for their children and helpful volunteers (Dorsch et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the pandemic likely enacted both horizontal and vertical stressors within families given the lockdown was not only unexpected but also potentially influenced families psychologically (e.g., grief, positive or negative coping behaviors, etc.) depending on their ability to watch their children play sports. Investigating parent spectating experiences during the pandemic is a worthwhile area of inquiry with the potential to help inform coaches and sport organizations as they respond and adapt their sport programs into this new era (Solomon, 2020). Kelly et al. (2020) argued that now is the time to examine how changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the immediate, short-, and long-term outcomes of parents and families. By taking time to understand parents' experiences, youth sport leaders, venue administrators, and sport scholars can tailor future guidance in times of crisis to best support the entire family. This study was guided by two exploratory research questions: (1) what were the direct, physical changes in youth sport

spectating experienced by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic and, (2) what were the indirect, psychosocial experiences of parent spectators during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Procedures

The authors employed an exploratory design using a secure online survey method to explore the aforementioned research questions. The Institutional Review Board of the lead author approved all study procedures. Participants for the study were recruited through social media and a digital university communication center stemming from the university of the lead author. The lead author posted a link to the secure Qualtrics survey on his personal Facebook page. Over the course of 30 days of data collection, according to Facebook data, the study was shared nine times by participants, indicating some snowball sampling. To mitigate and limit potential for bias, the author did not share the study beyond the initial posting and or employ additional outreach through individual messages to potential participants. As a result of approval to share the survey on social media (i.e., Facebook), researchers recruited participants beyond the scope of the university and from other regions across the country. This approach best matched a judgement sampling approach with the use of internet-user communities (Omli & Lavoie, 2012). To preserve confidentiality

with the university digital communication center, the author did not send out individual requests for participation, and information about the study was shared in the same portal where surveys for other studies at the universities were posted. The author also did not collect email addresses or offer a financial incentive to participants, in order to preserve confidentiality and avoid any potential research bias. The recruitment information shared with participants outlined the nature of the study, described the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and provided individuals with a link to the informed consent document. To be eligible to participate in the online survey, participants had to self-identify as a parent of a child athlete (ages 8 to 18) and reside in the United States. Recognizing the fluidity of family situations, no restrictions were placed upon the definition of parent by the research team.

Participants

A total of 112 participants completed the survey during a 30-day window in December 2020-January 2021. Parents provided demographic information about themselves (e.g., gender, age, race and/or ethnicity, and geographic location), about one of their children (e.g., age, gender, sport), and their child's sport setting (e.g., recreational, club, travel, other). Of those respondents, the median age of the participants was 43.1 years (SD=6.56). Parents reported the mean age of their child was 13.10 (SD=3.03). The participant sample was

Table 1.*Participant Demographics (N = 112)*

Variable	n	%	M	SD
Parent Age			43.1	6.56
Parent Gender				
Father (Cisgender Male)	19	17%		
Mother (Cisgender Female)	91	81%		
Parent (Non-binary)	1	1%		
Chose not to answer	1	1%		
Parent Race				
White, Caucasian	95	85%		
Other (Black, Hispanic, Bi-Racial)	17	15%		
Geographic Region				
Indiana	64	57%		
Louisiana	19	17%		
Michigan	8	7%		
Alabama	3	3%		
States reported twice (TN, MD, NC, PA, TX)	10	7%		
States reported once (CA, CO, FL, IL, IA, MO, SC, WA)	8	7%		
Child Age			13.10	3.03
Child Gender				
Cisgender Female	41	37%		
Cisgender Male	70	62%		
Chose not to answer	1	1%		
Child's Sport				
Baseball	22	20%		
Basketball	21	19%		
Soccer	21	19%		
Swimming	13	12%		
Softball	10	9%		
Other	35	31%		
Child's Sport Setting				
Recreational	22	20%		
Club	21	19%		
Travel	47	42%		
Other	5	4%		
Chose not to answer	17	15%		

predominantly female (81%). Indiana was the state of residence for more than half of the participants (57%) and the second most represented state was Louisiana (17%). In total, 85% of participants identified as White or Caucasian. A summary of participant demographics is presented in Table 1.

Measures

To capture direct, physical changes experienced by parents during the pandemic, parents were asked how they observed their child's sporting events during COVID-19: (a) in-person, (b) virtually, or (c) unable to observe. Then, parents who reported virtual spectating were asked what platform they used to watch their child virtually (open-ended question). To explore the psychosocial experiences of parents during the pandemic, participants were asked to answer an open-ended prompt modeled after Omli and LaVoi's (2012) study about parental anger. Prior to recruiting participants, the lead author pilot tested the open-ended prompt with five parents not involved in the present study. Previous published studies support the use of a small group of pilot test participants (Moore et al., 2020; Moore & Sullivan, 2020). This provided the research team with an opportunity to evaluate the wording of the prompt and revise the initial question to promote clarity and gather descriptive elements of parental experiences and responses. The open-ended prompt read:

The past year and the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges

for families whose children participate in sports. One of the most notable challenges is the inability for parents to attend events in person. Instead, many parents had to watch their children virtually through various streaming platforms. Recall your experience as a spectator over the past year (even if it was a one-time occurrence). Describe your experience with as much detail as possible. Feel free to include any thoughts regarding what you liked or disliked about the experience.

Data Analysis

Positionality Statement

Recognizing one's own intersectional identity and being cognizant of their positionality are regarded as a necessary process within many qualitative approaches (Tien, 2019). Being critically reflexive not only facilitated the researchers' understanding of the impact of their lived experiences and worldview on the study, but this transparency provided information to others who wish to interpret the study and its findings. Due to the nature of the current study, the authors wished to be forthright about their lived experiences and roles within the research project.

All authors acknowledged their positionality and its influence on the recruitment processes and data analysis procedure.

The first author is a White, able-bodied cisgender male, licensed social

worker, and a university researcher at a public U.S. institution in the midwestern United States. His lens and expertise were informed by past work in the youth sport domain as a researcher and volunteer coach for many years in both the southeastern and midwestern regions of the United States. The second author is a White, able-bodied cisgender female licensed social worker, and university researcher at a large, public U.S. institution. Her lens and expertise on the project were informed by her past work with underserved youth and families in both school and sport contexts. The third author is a White, able-bodied cisgender male, who is an Associate Professor in a social work department at a United States university. He has extensive work history with the NCAA and NAIA and is a coach at an NCAA institute. Further, two authors are parents of youth currently participating in sport.

Analytic Procedures

First, the authors examined the frequencies of the modalities through which participants reported participating in sports - either in-person, virtual, or not at all. To cross check the responses, the research team looked at the open-ended prompt and utilized a grounded theory procedure (Oktay, 2012; Oliver, 2012; Pulla, 2016). Grounded theory procedures were ideal for analyzing responses from the participants (Oktay, 2012; Oliver, 2012; Pulla, 2016), especially when the phenomenon of interest was not well-understood and a novel research topic (Creswell, 2003).

More specifically, the research team followed procedures for data analysis utilized by Omli and LaVoi (2012). The authors initially retrieved participant responses from a secure online database (Qualtrics).

Next, the research team read through all data multiple times, response by response, to become familiar with the spectating experiences of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Dedoose software, the authors initially reviewed each response using line-by-line coding that involved looking at responses independently of other responses. During the coding process, data was grouped by themes with common properties into a single code, until a set of themes provided a comprehensive account of the data while minimizing conceptual overlap among themes. The research team created a preliminary code for each unit of meaning (i.e., a sentence or paragraph used by a participant to describe a specific event); a total of eight preliminary theme codes emerged.

Notably, the consolidation of data themes involved a constant comparative process, which is a hallmark of grounded theory (Oktay, 2012; Oliver, 2012; Pulla, 2016). Throughout the process, codes that emerged from participant responses were repeatedly compared to the raw data (e.g., responses from other parents) and researchers revised responses until the codes fit the data as well as possible (Creswell, 2003). The researchers recognized closed-ended responses provided an initial prevalence of changes experienced by parents, but

the open-ended response demonstrated more nuanced physical experiences. From the open-ended prompt, the research team discovered more parents participated in virtual spectating *and* in-person spectating, creating a continuum of experiences. For example, one parent and their partner may have vacillated between watching virtually and attending in-person due to restrictions that only allowed one spectator per child.

According to Creswell (2003), a grounded theory can “assume the form of a narrative statement, a visual picture, or a series of hypotheses or propositions” (p. 56). As a result, after finalizing higher- and lower-order themes, the research team developed a conceptual model to provide a holistic representation of the data to describe the continuum of physical and psychosocial experiences reported by parents based on their spectating experiences. This work aimed to support calls by researchers detailing interactions within the family system (Dorsch et al., 2020) as well as with contexts that surround them, constituting a dynamic, reciprocal, intricate, and sometimes coordinated system rather than as an independent, top-down model (Kelly et al., 2020). To establish trustworthiness of the findings, the team used triangulation, frequent debriefing sessions between researchers, and peer scrutiny of the research project (Guba, 1981).

Results

Figure 1 summarizes the nuances of the youth sport spectating experiences

reported by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below, researchers provided a summary of the physical experiences reported by parents followed by themes that described the psychosocial experiences of parents during COVID-19 pandemic.

No Spectating

Physical experience. In total, approximately 4% of parents reported they were either unable to watch their children play sports due to COVID-19 restrictions or due to the cancellation of sporting events altogether. Namely, a majority of parents who reported their children’s sporting events were cancelled lived in California. Further, several parents discussed how strict limitations on spectating resulted in them being unable to enter venues to watch their children play sports.

Psychosocial experience. Parents who were unable to attend their children’s sporting events expressed negative emotional reactions such as grief, sadness, and frustration when discussing their experiences with sport cancellations or strict COVID-19 restrictions.

Grief. Parents who experienced the cancellation of sport expressed grief in their responses to the COVID-19 adaptations. For example, one parent discussed her sadness about the cancellation of her son’s senior baseball season. She shared:

His entire senior baseball season was cancelled. It was heartbreaking. He did play travel

ball this summer with limited spectators so we were able to watch that live. I think if he would have been able to play high school and us watch virtually, it would have been hard but better than nothing. Kids thrive off the cheering and making parents proud.

Another mother discussed the cancellation of her son’s basketball season. She specifically noted how the cancellation of sports influenced her son and the grief she also experienced as a parent:

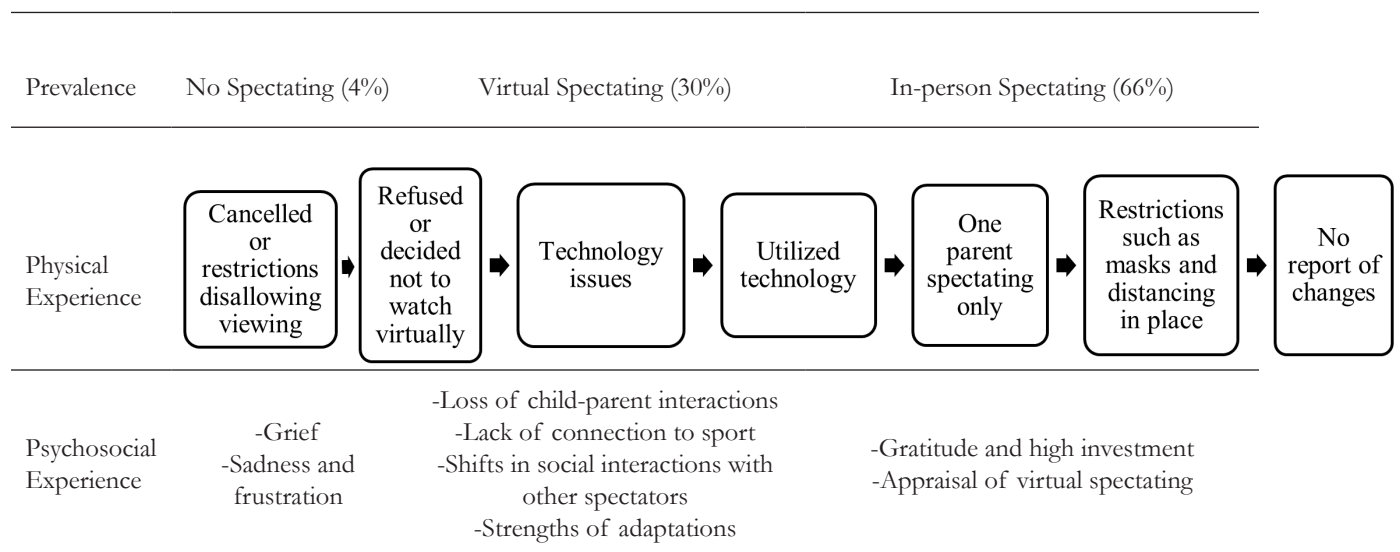
Due to the pandemic and change to virtual learning, my child’s school did not resume basketball. My son has not been able to play. It has affected him more than myself in numerous of ways. I miss the game and encouraging the students as well as being hands

on. It definitely threw a curb in what we know as normal.

Sadness and frustration. Several parents described their sadness and frustration associated with strict restrictions that resulted in them being unable to physically attend their children’s sporting events. One parent shared that she felt... “Sadness that I couldn’t be there in person at an outdoor event.” Another parent was frustrated with their inability to enter a venue due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The parent stated,

[I] drove to Pittsburgh, PA, and was unable to enter the building. The game was available on a link but unfortunately the link kept going in and out to the point where I became disinterested and kicked the ball with small children. The experience was horrible to

Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of Parent Spectating Experiences During COVID-19



have driven five hours and being unable to watch the game.

Virtual Spectating

Physical experience. A total of 34 parents (30%) reported engaging in virtual spectating during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those who participated in virtual spectating, the vast majority (88%) reported watching their child's games through Facebook Live or YouTube and this was done interchangeably, depending upon what platform was utilized to broadcast the games. The remaining participants used other applications (i.e., Gamechanger), and two participants reported having to pay for a subscription to watch a state-level championship competition. Several parents refused or chose not to watch their children play sports when presented with the virtual option. Another group of parents expressed challenges with technology (e.g., glitches, poor Wi-Fi in the gym, freezing, buffering, static view) when offered the virtual option. A common critique of virtual spectating included not being able to see the full field or venue. To demonstrate, one parent noted, "Virtual is better than not getting to see them play at all. Virtual is usually a "fixed" view that doesn't always show the whole floor or the whole activity." Finally, a subgroup of parents reported utilizing the technology offered with no reported issues or qualms.

Psychosocial experiences. Parents that reported engaging in virtual sport spectating described several psychosocial

experiences including (a) the loss of child-parent interactions that happen through sport; (b) a lack of connection to sport as parents; (c) shifts in social interactions with others; and, (d) the strengths of adaptations.

Loss of child-parent interactions that happen through sport. This theme included comments about how valuable child-parent interactions that happen through sport are to parents and how virtual spectating resulted in several losses in opportunities to connect with children. Multiple participants spoke about how they were unable to provide support in the forms of reassurance and cheering to their children during sporting events. One parent discussed her thoughts on virtual spectating and inability to connect with her child by stating,

The virtual chance to watch our children was able to provide a sense of being, however it was not the same. The cowbells of football weren't ringing, the student section of volleyball and basketball were empty, and we are holding onto the chance to see our children play in the dirt one last time before they graduate. I do not want to watch softball on the [screen], I want to be with my child. I want her to see me on the fence line when she needs reassurance. I want her and all of her teammates to hear us cheer for them. Virtually that can't happen.

A parent also spoke about being unable to be vocal, encourage their child, and

provide physical support after a game. The parent shared:

She did participate in basketball where I had to watch her virtually. I am a parent who is very vocal. I missed telling her how well she was doing; encouraging her; cheering from the sidelines; hugging her when the game was over - whether she lost or won. The closeness of being there was missed. But if you ask her, maybe she didn't miss her parents hootin' & hollerin' from the stands!

Another example demonstrates the range of emotions experienced by families when parents were asked to engage virtually. Ultimately, as evidenced by this example, parents sought to find ways to make their children feel supported even if they could not be physically present. As shared by a mother about her experience with virtual spectating:

I was devastated when told that we would only be able to view via Facebook Live. I cried, my daughter cried and we cried together. I was angry, but ultimately sad that I would be missing out on watching her play as I would never have this opportunity given back to me. After watching 2 games online, me and a few other parents decided to make spirit signs and placed them around the gym. The players/team loved the signs as they felt they weren't alone and they were reminded that we were watching from home.

Lack of connection to sport. Parents also described how the virtual spectating made them feel disconnected, including feeling less motivated and a sense of detachment from the sport experience overall. One parent shared about their experience with virtual spectating, "I find it less motivating to watch. There are usually technical difficulties and not being in the environment takes away from the experience." Another parent mentioned, "[I] did not like it - felt very detached and that it was stupid to limit attendance to that degree." Further, parents mentioned the virtual spectating negatively influenced their energy and motivation to support their child. A parent stated, "It was heartbreaking! It was difficult to watch my child to the full ability. I believe it impacted my child by changing the atmosphere of support in the stands. It didn't have the same energy and/or motivation to push my kid to his best ability."

Shifts in social interactions with other spectators. A third theme voiced by parents who engaged in virtual spectating included changes in their interactions with other spectators including spouses, partners, extended family members, and other parents or spectators. To demonstrate, several parents spoke about how restrictions resulted in only one parent from a family being able to attend their children's sporting events. In this regard, parents with partners discussed changes in their family dynamics in regard to their ability to attend games together. Additionally, parents mentioned that being unable

to attend in-person changed the social interactions they often had with other parents and spectators. The following quote provides an example of the negative shifts experienced by parents who watched their children play sports virtually:

There was no fellowship, just observation. I missed interacting with others and talking about the students or just generally sharing interactions. I tried watching my son play indoor basketball virtually and it was a disaster. They only allowed one spectator per kid, so my husband and I would alternate going to the games. There was no fellowship, just observation. I missed interacting with others and talking about the students or just generally sharing interactions.

Alternatively, another subgroup of parents also discussed how the virtual experience buffered negative in-person commentary expressed by other spectators and allowed them to interact via sending comments in the online space with extended family members such as grandparents. To demonstrate how shifts in social interactions were perceived positively, one participant noted:

My wife and I were 100% content with the virtual experience. It's always a better view to watch in person but we had no problem watching remotely. Our commentary was good and with no fans in the stands or limited fans the amount of annoying comments

were almost non-existent. We always used Facebook Live which seemed to be a good stream to use. It was fun to leave comments and also see that many grandparents and other family members watching from afar.

Strengths of adaptations. The fourth theme that emerged among parents who engaged in virtual spectating during the COVID-19 pandemic was their perceptions of the strengths of the online viewing experience. The pros of delivering youth sports virtually voiced by parents included the allowance of more family members to watch their children play sports, the ability to view more games at one time (i.e., if they had multiple children involved in sport), cost savings (i.e., no travel), and the comfort of being at home. One parent's quote describes the adaptability to changes expressed by participants in the study:

Pros-I got to watch my son from the comfort of my own home. I could cook dinner while waiting for his next race. Also, a big advantage was that family, especially grandparents and out of town relatives, could watch via the streaming link, whereas pre-COVID, this was not possible. Cons-the live stream link was not always dependable...In my opinion, watching virtually should be an addition for spectators, but not a replacement.

Several parents also discussed the cost benefits and comfort associated with

virtual spectating. Parents appreciated saving money but also missed the child-parent interactions that take place through sport. For example, one parent stated, “It was great to be able to watch them play. Nice in the comfort of our home and didn’t cost any money or travel time. Didn’t get the overall experience being there to witness the emotions of the players and get to talk after the game was over.” In contrast, some parents adapted well to the changes and thought the virtual option did not result in any losses in interactions. Namely, this experience seemed to depend on what sport the child played. For instance, the parent of a swimmer shared, “With swimming there is little cheering that your athlete can hear, honestly, virtually attending these meets has been amazing.” To the surprise of the authors, there were limited comments concerning how the virtual experience mitigated negative spectator interactions (i.e. coaching from the sidelines, disagreements, or spectator critiques of officials, as examples).

In-Person Spectating

Physical experience. A third subset of parents (66%) attended their children’s sporting events in-person. Among those who were able to attend their children’s sporting events in-person, parents discussed minor changes to the viewing experience or no changes at all. For some parents, COVID-19 restrictions influenced the number of spectators who were able to watch the sporting events in-person. For example, several parents reported that due to COVID-19 restrictions only one parent

was able to attend games. Notably, some parents reported that when only one parent was able to attend the games and the other parent watched virtually, whereas other parents reported their partner did not have a virtual option to watch the games from afar. Further, several parents who attended in-person discussed the restrictions in the venues where their children played sports during the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions reported by parents included social distancing, mask-wearing, and no concessions (i.e., snacks, drinks, etc.). Lastly, several parents reported that they did not experience any changes to their spectating experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Psychosocial experience. Parents who were able to attend their children’s sporting events in-person expressed gratitude and a high level of investment to sport and also shared their perceptions of virtual spectating. The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to evoke these responses from parents and contributes to our understanding of the valuation placed on physical attendance within the youth sport settings.

Gratitude and high investment. A majority of parents who attended their children’s sporting events in-person shared their feelings of gratitude and high investment. Physical presence of parents was equated with high levels of sport investment. Further, parents who expressed sentiments of gratitude also described strong connection of their children to sports (i.e., “sport they love”). Among those attending in-person, parents discussed adaptation

including wearing masks and social distancing. These physical adaptations were matched with statements of gratitude in being able to be physically present. For example, a parent stated, "Overall, the experience was fine. We had to wear masks to our seats and could attend practice, but I was grateful she could still play. I am very thankful my daughter was able to play the sport she loves." Another parent shared similar sentiments of appreciation and strong attendance to events during the pandemic. She stated, I am blessed that I was able to attend most events in person. We were able to see all of her school games. We were able to see most of her club games. Some games only allowed one parent, others both. I would have been upset to not be able to watch her enjoy playing a sport she loves.

Appraisal of virtual spectating.

A second emergent theme among parents who were able to attend their children's sporting events included an appraisal of how they might respond to virtual spectating. Due to the prompt, parents often reflected on how they might have reacted to a virtual option had COVID-19 restrictions impacted them in this way. Parents again shared gratitude for their in-person experiences but went further when describing how they thought virtual spectating would influence their well-being. One parent discussed their strong connection to the in-person experience by stating, "I would not have enjoyed watching my child play

a game virtually. I love to be there and be completely involved. Having to watch it virtually would have been depressing." Similarly, parents shared how their perceptions of how their children would have been impacted had they not been able to attend games in-person. One parent mentioned, "I personally didn't watch my daughter virtually. But I believe it would be different to do so. Active sport kids love to see their family in the stands watching them play. I know personally my daughter hates when I have to miss a game." Participants seemed to equate physical presence at youth sporting events as representative of their level of involvement. The inability to be physically present was challenging and an emotional experience for parents.

Discussion

This study sought to elevate and explore the physical and psychosocial experiences of parents of youth sport participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to respond to calls to examine family interactions within the context of youth sport during the pandemic (Kelly et al., 2020) and has particular relevance to sport administrators and scholars. Before this study, the landscape of professional sports witnessed multiple postponements and cancellations of mega-events such as the Olympic Games and European Football Championship, not to mention other leagues and events (Evans et al., 2020; Parnell et al., 2020). However, the lived experiences of parents and

caregivers with children and adolescents engaged in youth sport were relatively unknown. As such, these findings make a unique contribution to the literature by extending research on the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the parents of youth sport participants (Dorsch et al., 2020). This study has relevance to parents, scholars, and youth sport leaders, who are seeking to understand the workings of the sport system in this context and provide positive experiences for all involved.

First, it is important to highlight how the pandemic changed the parent spectating experience. Results indicate few parents and families experienced direct, physical changes including the cancellation of youth sports altogether (i.e., 4% of participants). This study's findings, however, illuminated differences in reported cancellations (4%) and shifts to virtual spectating (33%) in states with stricter COVID-19 policies and laws (i.e., more cancellations in California). In contrast, results also showed youth sports continued at a high prevalence in states with less restrictive COVID-19 policies and laws (i.e., Indiana, Louisiana). In total, over two-thirds of participants (66%) reported attending their children's sporting events in-person in 2020. High parental engagement in sport via in-person spectating likely allowed family interactions through sport to remain intact during the first year of the pandemic. Meanwhile, cancellations and strict restrictions appeared to negatively influence child-parent relationships and limit important

social connections for families involved in youth sports. It appears sport venue managers and youth sport administrators were able to provide sports experiences for families with very few exceptions. These experiences impacted parents in multiple ways.

Results indicate that the direct, physical changes experienced by parents and caregivers in the youth sport environment were indirectly associated with several psychosocial outcomes. Most notably, the cancellation of youth sports during the COVID-19 pandemic evoked grief, sadness, and frustration among study participants. The feelings described by parents and caregivers and adaptations in the youth sport environment align with tenants of family systems theory. Parents and caregivers disclosed the presence of horizontal stressors (i.e., transitions in the environment) and vertical stressors (i.e., unresolved grief). All involved should be aware that when horizontal and vertical stressors intersect in a sport-based context, the potential for familial conflict is higher (Bremer, 2012). If risks for conflict were higher due to cancellations and strict restrictions, the disruption of youth sports during COVID-19 may have not only changed family schedules and lifestyles but also exacerbated parental stress resulting in negative impacts to the family system. Parent and caregiver well-being can infiltrate family functioning and trickle down to influence children's behavioral, social, cognitive, and emotional outcomes (Hertzman & Boyce, 2010). Venue managers and

youth sport leaders must consider these consequences in their decision-making processes.

These findings contribute to an important discussion of how sport leaders can respond and support the families of youth that did not get to play during the pandemic. Sanderson and Brown (2020) argued the emotional toll of canceling youth sports was significant, especially for parents that did not get to watch children play their last year of amateur sport. Accordingly, parents and caregivers that missed out on their children's final season of sport participation may benefit from activities that bring them closure and connection. Kessler (2019) argued meaning-making is an important tenant of processing grief. As COVID-19 restrictions lift, there are opportunities to help families heal and move forward despite the cancellation of sports. Sport leaders and coaches can invite players back for alumni nights to acknowledge COVID-19 setbacks and celebrate past participation in sport. School and community events may also help families engage and reconnect with coaches, other parents, and youth who also did not get to play sports during the COVID-19 pandemic. Designing activities that help the whole family cope with the cancellation of sports during the pandemic may help parents and caregivers process their grief.

Results also identify opportunities for sport leaders and coaches to better support families in the event COVID-19 restrictions again limit sport participation. Walsh (2015) advocated

family resilience is cultivated through three processes: communication (informational, emotional sharing, family coping), organization (adaptability, connectedness, and social and economic resources), and belief systems (spirituality, hope). To support healthy family functioning, Prime et al. (2020) recommended parents engage in transparent, developmentally appropriate conversations with their children about COVID-19. Moreover, researchers advocated strategies such as an "in-it-together" attitude and engagement in "emotion-focused discussions about ongoing changes within the family and society that allow for sharing and normalization of difficult feelings (p.639)" are protective for families in times of stress (Prime et al., 2020). If faced with strict restrictions in the future, youth sport leaders and coaches can partner with families to cultivate family resilience. This may include designating time and space for families to discuss emotional responses to changes in the youth sport environment, to problem-solve in the face of new adaptations (i.e., working and schooling from home), and to identify needs and connect families to social and economic services.

Furthermore, findings provide information about the role of youth sport for family interactions and about the social support systems parents and caregivers access through youth sport. Parents and caregivers that experienced shifts to virtual spectating reported changes in relationships across multiple interactional levels (i.e., child-parent,

parent-to-parent, and parents with other parents in the sport community). Results align with Pizzo et al. (2018) who found family bonding was significantly higher for traditional sport spectators than the virtual representation of sport. Findings point to the utilization of sport as a means of family bonding but also challenges in recreating these important social interactions in the virtual setting. As youth return to sport, leaders must be cognizant of changes in child-parent and parent-to-parent interaction patterns during the pandemic. To support holistic health and family wellness, Whitley et al. (2021) recommended leaders of youth sport focus on cultivating social connections through family nights and parent advisory boards to help meet youths' social and emotional needs after the pandemic. These recommendations are highly transferable to meeting the needs of the entire family system especially for parents and caregivers that achieve identity fulfillment from their children's engagement in athletics (Meân & Kassing, 2008). Together, these activities may help families cope with adversity, reestablish relationships through sport, and develop a collective sense of agency, hope, and optimism for the future.

Virtual adaptations and changes in the social support systems may influence family decisions regarding participation in sport in the future. Several parents and caregivers voiced a lack of enjoyment and low motivation when watching their children play sports on virtual platforms. The lack of connection and enjoyment to sports may negatively influence

family decisions regarding future sport participation. The Aspen Institute (2020) recently found children's interests in youth sports are declining in response to the pandemic. Moreover, youth sport participants may have felt less supported without their parents and caregivers in the audience and choose not to return to sport. Youth and families that chose not to return to sport after the pandemic may increase their children's risks for social isolation and poor physical and mental health, as well as miss out on positive opportunities for family bonding. Youth sport leaders may need to recruit youth and families back to sport, and reassess family resources, time, and barriers to participation that are the result of economic and social changes associated with the pandemic (i.e., inflation, job loss, loss of family members, etc.).

The shift away from in-person sport spectating could be positive or negative for children depending on the family system. Future research should examine how changes in parental proximity and spectating influenced child athletes during the pandemic. Youth and families may have benefited from virtual adaptations that created more physical space between children and their parents or parents and coaches, other parents/family members, and referees. For example, virtual spectating may have helped parents avoid hearing or engaging in unruly spectator behaviors. Interestingly, many of the spectator behaviors which were problematic to the youth sport environment, (i.e., yelling at referees, coaching from the sidelines, outbursts of anger, etc.) were minimally

discussed among parents in this sample that engaged in virtual spectating. This prompts questions concerning whether virtual spectating mitigates unruly behaviors among parents and is a solution to inappropriate parental behaviors in youth sports. Future research on the spectating behaviors of parents in online settings is highly relevant to a growing body of literature pointing to the emotional responses of parent spectators. Scholars found parental emotions expressed at youth sporting events can result in bursts of anger, disagreements with officials or inappropriate forms of coaching or engagement from the sidelines directed either at children, other youth sport participants, other parents, coaches, teams, or spectators (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008; Jeanfreau et al, 2020; Omli & Lavoie, 2009; Reynolds, 2020, 2021).

Of significance to the future of youth sports were the benefits of the virtual spectating options perceived by some families. Virtual spectating allowed parents to engage more extended family members in sport spectating and decreased costs of participation in travel sports. Within this study, the authors discovered virtual spectating in a shared online space may have helped some families create greater social connections, bonds, and a sense of community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents reported utilizing several different online platforms. The platforms most utilized by venues and parents were Facebook Live and YouTube. Namely, parents who chose to stream the games

did so in hopes of recapturing the in-person experience for other spectators. These findings align with studies on professional sport spectating that found shared space, even when spectating virtually, is a key element of how sport creates social connections (Weed, 2007, 2008). Similarly, travel restrictions and pivots to online spectating appeared to reduce costs for families making youth sports more fiscally manageable which may have been important for families experiencing economic changes and job instability during the COVID-19 pandemic (Solomon, 2020). Virtual spectating may be a way for children to feel more supported by external family members, and an offering that allows parents with multiple children to see their children play sports, save costs associated with travel and connect with other families.

Addressing the issue of technology access and internet stability is an area for future improvement if virtual spectating is to continue the youth sport domain, both during and outside of the pandemic. Social media platforms connected parents and allowed for interactivity among spectators. Nisar et al. (2018) found interactivity can increase spectatorship, yet parents illuminated issues in viewership that can be improved upon moving forward. New ideas about fan experience apps (Uhrich, 2021), immersive participation as e-participants (Sturm, 2020), and situated visualization (Lo et al., 2021) apply to future innovations to virtual spectatorship in the youth sports domain. Improving the

experience of virtual spectating is highly relevant to most sampled parents that attended in-person that voiced concerns about virtual spectating, but also recognized that virtual would be better than not getting to see their children play at all. These reports indicate virtual spectating may grow and be critical to the maintenance of youth sport in the event of future COVID-19 restrictions.

Finally, parents and caregivers that attended their children's sporting events in-person expressed gratitude and high levels of investment at the time of this study. The maintenance of youth sports that allowed sports to continue to engage in spectating in-person appeared to be a stabilizing factor for families that resulted in positive emotions and high levels of engagement. Considering these findings, identifying safe and responsible ways for youth and families to continue to engage in sport is paramount. Youth sport leaders and coaches have a responsibility to support and protect their child athletes *and* their families not only to prevent the spread of COVID-19 but also to keep families and children mentally well. Safety protocols and holistic responses that seek to reduce the presence of horizontal and vertical stressors for parents and caregivers, as well as the promotion of strategies that facilitate resilience among families, are central to the future of amateur sports and responses to COVID-19.

Future Research

As evidenced by this study, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the

landscape of youth sports. Findings have important implications for sports practitioners, especially concerning the psychosocial experience of parents and the influence of the pandemic on family dynamics. The authors encourage scholars to build upon these findings and explore how youth sport influences familial stress, family patterns of communication, parental mental health, parental involvement, and children's sport performance and well-being. Sport psychologists, social workers, and youth sport coaches can also draw upon these findings to consider how to support families in maintaining positive coping behaviors during times of heightened stress and loss of valuable social connections. Results from this study point to the significant role of sport within the family system. Practitioners and scholars alike can look at how the context of sport can be leveraged for family intervention to improve child and adolescent outcomes. To date, limited research exists on the value of sport in therapeutic or clinical settings (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021), especially in exploring the role of sport-based interventions facilitated with and among parents and families.

There are also opportunities in the future to explore COVID-19 changes from venue administrators, referees, coaches, extended family members, siblings, and child athletes themselves. Namely, opportunities to explore how youth responded to parents not being in stands and to determine whether virtual spectating curbed hostile behaviors

among and between parents. This study also points to the potential to assess and examine the various dilemmas presented by virtual spectating experiences, such as filming children without permission and providing the necessary infrastructure (i.e., Wi-Fi) to allow for streaming with limited interruptions and to build community and social interactions, even with limited physical proximity. It is also noted parents often directed their emotional energy and feelings of frustration toward the venue infrastructure and poor streaming services while simultaneously expressing a “better than nothing” attitude. These findings provide a launching pad for future research that further explores how to improve virtual spectating in the youth sport domain in the event of future lockdowns, or other experiences where live attendance is cost-prohibitive or not possible.

The provision of technology is also important to the spectator experience. In terms of sport participation and engagement, venue administrators and coaches can utilize findings to improve virtual spectatorship in the event of future crisis or adaptations in youth sport settings. The experiences of parents with the virtual option were contingent on the strength of the Wi-Fi, streaming platform accessibility, and viewing options (static or mobile of the field or venue). These findings provide venues and sport stakeholders with tangible steps they can take to ensure parents and families can access youth sports in the future should lockdowns be reinstated. Finally, a subset of parents noted the

strengths associated with adaptations and virtual spectating that have important implications for sport scholars, practitioners, and administrators. Scholars can explore whether virtual spectating has the potential to promote a sense of security, protection, and economic value that can increase family engagement and address issues of diversity and inclusion in youth sport.

Limitations. This study is not without limitations. This study was conducted through online channels which originated in Indiana and participants without online access may have been excluded. Participants who identified as female comprised over 80% and over 50% of the participants resided in Indiana. A more diverse pool of participants may have yielded different results. More engaged parents may have participated and disproportionately women and those in Indiana. Additionally, the study focused broadly upon sports that parents identified as the child’s primary sport but did not discuss if the pandemic caused families to reduce engagement in sport throughout the year. The research study’s prompt also did not ask parents about their level of engagement or goals of spectating (i.e. more than cheering their kids on) before the pandemic. Additionally, the qualitative bias and reflexivity of scholars who are white and have a strong connection to sport, both in their scholarship related to youth development, as former athletes, and in various coaching and parenting roles may have impacted results.

Conclusion

This study makes a novel contribution to the spectating literature by capturing the lived experiences of the parents of youth sport participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic did disrupt the lives of families engaged in youth sports and many parents experienced cancellations of sport entirely or had to rely on virtual spectating to maintain connections to their children and sports overall. Participants had varied lived experiences that prompted a closer examination of intersecting factors within youth sport that affect family dynamics. These findings confirm some past research and provide a useful, new framework that describes how direct, physical changes in the youth sport environment influence the psychosocial experiences of parents and caregivers. This study advances the conversation about how families engage in youth sports and how restrictions associated with the global pandemic affect family systems. Additionally, these findings encourage future research opportunities such as the exploration of family wellness and mental health through sport; technology changes and family interactions in sport; technology integration and venue management; and parental spectating behaviors in virtual settings. This study revealed the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic for families participating in youth sport while also illuminating the perceived importance of youth sports in American culture.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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