Examining Identification to Play Flag Football and Consumption of American Football Among Participants in Mexico

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While few countries have a professional league of “American” football, the popularity of the sport keeps rising across the globe. Nevertheless, when compared to the popularity of basketball and baseball, American football still lags behind in the global market (Marvez, 2013). The complexity of its rules and the costs associated with its practice impede its reaching a wider range of participants which might also affect the growth of spectators around the world. For the National Football League (NFL), exploring new markets is a must as the domestic market gets saturated (SB Nation, 2013). Recently, Mexico, along with China and Japan, have all been considered as potential markets for NFL expansion (Breer, 2011). Although there is no professional league of American football in Mexico, an adapted form of football or ‘flag football’ is very popular at the collegiate and youth levels, where thousands of participants play this sport all over the country. Considering that some overlap exists between a participant’s motive to play a given sport with the consumption of that sport (Green & Acosta, 2007), the purpose of this study was to examine if participants’ different level of identification with flag football/American football influence the patterns of (1) motives to participate in flag football, and (2) the consumption of NFL products (media and merchandising). Based on this, three research questions were generated: RQ1: When grouped by identification level (low vs. high), are there different patterns in their motivation to participate in flag football games among groups?  RQ2: When grouped by identification level, are there different patterns of NFL games consumption? RQ3: When grouped by identification level, are there different patterns of NFL merchandise consumption?

Fan identification is an important factor in explaining sport fan behaviors (Capella, 2002; Wann & Branscomb, 1993) and previous studies have shown that levels of identification relate to many cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects (Capella, 2002; Wann & Branscomb, 1993). In addition, Kwon, Trail and Anderson (2006) and Robinson and Trail (2005) noted that fans develop sport identification with multiple points of attachment. In this study, identification with flag football and American football were used as point of attachment.

Moreover, motivation has been a popular subject in sport contexts because it is an important factor for sport participation. Fink, Trail and Anderson (2002) found that motivation influenced current behaviors such as merchandise and media consumption as well as future behaviors including continued loyalty, future attendance, and future merchandise consumption.

A 33-item questionnaire was drawn from the literature on sport identification (Trail, Robinson, Dick & Gillentine, 2003), sport motivation (Wann, 1995), and sport consumption (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee & Mahony, 2008). All sub dimensions met the minimum required level of .70 for reliability: Sport Identification: 6 items (identification with flag football: α = .89; identification with American football: α=.94); Sport Motivation:15 items (social interaction: α=.88; escape: α=.83; entertainment: α=.85; achievement: α=.90; and similarity α=.81); and Sport Consumption:12 items (current merchandise: α = .89; future merchandise: α = .94; current media: α = .92; future media: α = .94).

An online survey was posted on the website of FLAGTEX, a sporting organization that organizes flag football tournaments in Mexico. After deleting 12 incomplete surveys, a total of 456 surveys remained for further analyses. Of the 456 participants, 59.9% (n= 273) were male, while 35.9% (n= 164) were female with the average age of 26.57 (SD= 7.53). Respondents were grouped into four clusters using K-means cluster analysis, using a combined scale of identification with flag football and American football. The four groups were (1) low identification with flag football and high identification with American football (n=81), (2) both sports with high identification (n=250), (3) high identification with flag football and low identification with American football (n=91), and both sports with low identification (n=34). Three separate multiple analyses of variance were conducted to determine group differences in
participants’ motivation, current and future consumptions of NFL games, and current and future merchandise consumptions.

Results showed that in terms of motivation of participants, ‘achievement’ was the most important ($M = 6.32$) and similarity between flag football and American football was the least important motive ($M = 4.97$). Overall, the patterns of motives were similar in their order across different groups except ‘similarity’, but the mean scores were significantly different among groups (Wilk’s $\lambda = .56$, $F(3,435) = 18.48$, $p< .05$). The second MANOVA revealed that there was a significant difference in current and future NFL merchandise consumption across groups (Wilk’s $\lambda = .81$, $F(6,892) = 18.48$, $p< .05$). In general, respondents have greater intention to buy NFL merchandise in the future ($M=4.79$) than the current merchandise consumption ($M= 3.80$). The MANOVA on current and future media consumption of NFL was somewhat interesting. Although there were significant group differences (Wilk’s $\lambda = .61$, $F(6,902) = 42.07$, $p< .05$; $\eta^2 = .22$), the overall mean scores between current ($M = 5.29$) and future ($M = 5.32$) did not change much except Group 3 with high identification with flag football and low identification with American football, who were willing to watch more games in the future.

Results of the study provided empirical evidence of the interconnection between flag football participation and consumption of NFL products. Specifically, this study highlights the need to evaluate different segments of flag football participants and the likelihood to consume media (watch games) and buy products of the National Football League (NFL). Implications of group differences in their motives, current and future merchandise and media consumption of NFL products will be discussed.