The Effects of an Intercollegiate Football on the Psychological Health, Adaptation, and Life Satisfaction of First Year International Students

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The number of international students at US colleges and university has been gradually growing and these students continue to comprise a larger proportion of higher education students. These international students have a valuable financial impact on universities in advanced countries, as well as they also contribute to these countries through a variety of social conventions and perspectives that enhance cultural awareness and appreciation (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002). However, many international students have a difficult adjustment period to college trying to accommodate new educational and social environments and different cultural values (Essandoh, 1995; Mori, 2000). Thus, international students often have a more stressful time adjusting to American colleges and universities than U.S. students (Cheng, Leong, & Geist, 1993; Sandhu, 1994). It has been argued that college students can build social relationships by following intercollegiate sports through increased student interactions, friendships, and social affiliations (Duderstadt, 2001; Sperber, 2000). Sport spectatorship may provide opportunities for international students to build social networking with local students and gain knowledge about host cultures. However, research has not explored the potential role of sports in the adjustment and socialization process of international students. This study investigates the role of sport in helping international students assuage social and psychological adaptation to American culture. Specifically, this study examines the effects of consuming (live and TV) college football games involving their own university’s team on the psychological health (i.e., acculturative stress (AC), self-concept (SC), alienation (AL), friendship (FR), anxiety (AN), out-group evaluation (OE), psychological (PA) and sociocultural adaptation (SA), and life satisfaction (LS) of first year international students at a large university.

Many studies have noted that adaptation to a new culture through acculturation is very difficult and stressful (Choi, 1997; Mori, 2000; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Yang & Clum, 1994). Stress induced by this adaptive process is referred to as acculturative stress. Acculturative stress can lead international students to have psychological symptoms such as isolation, helplessness, hopelessness, sadness, feelings of loss, anger, disappointment, and a sense of inferiority (Mori, 2000). Further, research has shown that acculturative stress of international students is connected with depression (Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2007; Ying & Han, 2006). Psychologists have focused on the ways that contact with other group members can influence attitudes toward those groups. Allport (1954) notes if members of groups are in a certain situation that invests equal status between two groups, shared goals to pursue, cooperation to gain those goals, and a sense of institutional support for the intergroup contact, then contact is more likely to have a positive effect on attitudes toward the out-group. Pettigrew (1997, 1998) proposes other factors to facilitate those mechanisms, such as the potential for intimate contact and friendship.

In addition, cultural norms, language barriers, and the different nature of friendships in the host culture may also make it more difficult for international students to form friendships and feel lonely. Sport is one social activity that has been recognized in most communities and cultures around the world as a powerful medium to bring people together (Eitzen & Sage, 2003), and is also more likely to encourage emotional attachment and fan identification than other forms of entertainment (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Researchers have distinguished psychological (emotional/affective) adaptation and sociocultural (behavioral) adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1999). Psychological adaptation can be considered within stress and refer to feelings of well-being or satisfaction with transitions that result from examining depression or mood disturbance (e.g. Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Sociocultural adaptation can be considered a social learning prototype, and refers to how individuals go through the acculturation process to deal with their daily life in a new cultural environment.

Based on a review of literature, we proposed two hypotheses to test the impact of spectating college football on psychological health, adaptation, and life satisfaction of international students:

H1: After controlling for the sport fan motivations of first year international students, acculturative stress, alienation, psychological adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation will be higher for those students that consumed a low number
of their college’s football games compared to those that consumed a moderate to high number of their college’s football games.

H2: After controlling for the sport fan motivation of first year international students, self-concept, friendship, anxiety, out-group evaluation, and life satisfaction will be lower for those students that consumed a low number of their college’s football games compared to those that consumed a moderate to high number of their college’s football games.

We also proposed two hypotheses to test the relationships between the study variables:

H3: For first year international students, the level of acculturative stress, self-concept and alienation is positively related to the psychological and sociocultural.

H4: For first year international students, sociocultural adaptation is positively related to the life satisfaction.

To test the hypotheses, we collected data from 100 international students at two different times (November, time 1 and March, time 2). The same students represented the sample in both collection periods. The questionnaire included several frequently used and valid scales such as the Acculturation Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) (Sandu & Asrabadi, 1994), Intergroup friendship scale (Cunningham, 2008), Cross-cultural anxiety scale (Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000), Out-group evaluation scale (Wright, Aron, McLaughin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997), Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) (Wann, 1995), and the Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). To test hypotheses 1 and 2, we utilized a MANCOVA, controlling for sport fan motivation on the group of outcome variables. We used two separate multiple regressions to test hypotheses 3 and 4.

The MANCOVA used to test H1 and H2 was significant (Pillai’s Trace = .33, F [15, 83] = 2.72, p. < .01). Follow up univariate analyses demonstrated partial support for H1 as the estimated marginal means of four different variables (AC, AL, PA, SA) were significantly lower for the moderate to heavy consumers (those that consumed 2 or more games) than the means for the low consumers (consumed 0 or 1 game). Similarly, for H2, significant differences were noted on five variables (SC, FR, AN, OE, LS). For these five variables the heavy consumers indicated higher (i.e., more positive) levels than the low consumers. The regression analyses provided support for H3 and H4.

Based on the findings, college football appears to be effective in facilitating positive outcomes including the acculturation, adaptation, and life satisfaction of international students, potentially through a socialization process. The findings of this study may suggest that intercollegiate football can play a significant role in helping international students socialize and adapt to American culture, by potentially facilitating social relationships with peer groups of American and/or other international students. More specific contributions, implications, and future directions for research will be discussed in the presentation.