The Meaning of American Football among Chinese Spectators: A Qualitative Investigation of Live Sport Events Viewing Experiences

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Introduction
Why do some foreign sports take root in a new culture while others remain underappreciated? In order to answer this question, modern diffusion studies in sports have focused primarily on the structural aspects of diffusion, the environmental context, and the promotion strategies (Kaufman & Patterson, 2005; Luschen, 1967). The existing research, however, fails to provide an adequate explanation for why American football—a sport enjoyed by millions of North Americans—is slow to gain a foothold on the East Asian market. The NFL opened its office in China in 2007, hoping to hoist American football to become one of the most popular sports in this country. However, despite vast investments in broadcasting the Super Bowl, creating the country’s first football league, and organizing numerous marketing activities, American football still ranks 20th on the list of the most popular sports in China (Landreth, 2012). Although there has been a large amount of research on culture and sport over the last 40 years, limited attention has been paid to different meanings of American football in different cultures (e.g., Maguire, 1990, 1991). In particular, little is known about the meanings of American football in Chinese culture, even though a number of sports scholars and practitioners have long recognized the need for more inclusive perspectives on foreign spectators’ experiences of American football (Hite, 2014; Landreth, 2012; Maguire, 1990). In light of this, the objectives of this study are: 1) To expand understanding of Chinese spectators’ experiences of American football; 2) To identify the meanings of American football among Chinese spectators.

Review of Relevant Literature
Culture is learned and gained from the social environment across generations (Barnouw, 1985). It consists of cognitive elements, such as beliefs, values, and norms, which come from and are reflected in daily life and experiences (Chick & Dong, 2005; Luschen, 1967). A major premise of sport management studies is that sport is structurally related to culture and society (Han, 2009). As some have even argued, sport is a metaphor for the socio-cultural system in which it occurs and becomes popular (Luschen, 1967). Since research has indicated that people with different cultural backgrounds also differ with respect to their thoughts and behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Morris & Peng, 1994), it is important for sports franchises and marketers to understand the similarities and differences of various cultures with respect to perceptions of sports such as American football (Armstrong, 2002). Individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980, 1983; Triandis, 1990), the most widely used dimension of cultural variability (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2005), serves as the theoretical foundation for this qualitative study. The individualism-collectivism dimension is regarded as “central to an understanding of cultural values, of work values, of social systems, as well as in the studies of morality, the structure of constitutions, and cultural patterns” (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988, p. 270). Hofstede (2001) defined individualism as the “emotional independence from groups, organizations, or other collectivities” (p. 221). North American and Western European cultures are oftentimes regarded as representative of individualism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivism, on the other hand, highlights interdependence between in-group members (Cho, 2000). Most Asian, African, and Central/South American cultures can be categorized into a collectivism cluster (Hofstede, 1980).

The concept of cultural value orientation (e.g., individualism-collectivism) has been examined in the field of sport management. As early as in 1954, Riesman and Denny described how elements of American football, including its hard contact and centrality on the individual, are representative of the culture of American society. More recent studies examined the relationship between sports fan motivations/attitudes and cultural value orientations among American, Korean and Taiwanese college students (Gau & Kim, 2011; Han, 2009). Han’s (2009) findings revealed
that individualism and collectivism play an important role in shaping sports fan motivations and sport consumer behaviors. Gau and Kim (2011) additionally found that sport attitudes among Taiwanese, Korean and American fans are related to socio-cultural aspects, which in turn are influenced by the place or country of origin of the spectators. Until now, however, there has been little evidence of how cultural value orientations influence sports spectator experiences with respect to a specific sport. In addition, the voices of Chinese sport spectators have remained silent. Thus, the current study helps to extend the existing literature by exploring Chinese sport spectators’ experiences of watching American football and the meanings they derive from their spectator experiences.

Data and Methods
The study employed the consensual qualitative research method (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) to explore sports spectator experiences and meanings among Chinese college students. Fifteen Chinese international college students pursuing a graduate degree at a large Midwestern university were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 25 years old. All were 1st-year graduate students who had arrived to the U.S. within three months prior to the study. In order to participate in the study, participants had to attend an American football training program organized by the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics (DIA) at the end of September, 2014. The training program was comprised of videos explaining American football rules and interactive games. After the training program, participants had to attend at least three intercollegiate football games. As incentives, tickets for the games were provided by the DIA free of charge. Interviews will be held at the end of the Fall 2014 semester. They will be tape-recorded and transcribed word-by-word. Interviews will be conducted in Mandarin and the transcripts back-translated to English. The interview protocol was developed based on a thorough review of the literature on individualism-collectivism and sports spectatorship. Probes will be used to elicit additional information during the interviews. Sample questions will include: What are your feelings and thoughts about watching American football? What do you like the most/least about watching American football games? The transcripts will be analyzed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results and Discussion
Upon submission of this abstract, all 15 participants will have attended the American football training program and two of the intercollegiate football games. Participants will attend the last football game in November, 2014. Interviews will be conducted before the end of the Fall semester of 2014, and the analysis will be performed in December and January, 2015. The findings and implications of the study will be discussed.

The findings of this study will not only extend the literature on the effects of culture on sports spectator experiences, but also contribute additional insights to the field of sport management. The results of the study will allow us to provide feasible marketing suggestions for those who want to disseminate and popularize American football in China. The findings may also offer insights into international students’ sports spectator experiences and thus be helpful for college sports administrators who want to improve experiences of international students.