Community Value Innovation: The Role of Minor-League Sport Teams in Rural Communities

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Today, a great number of rural development institutions and their external stakeholders put their efforts into fostering a culture of innovation in order to develop and refine rural communities. This is in response to the inevitable global economic challenges that rural communities are facing. In particular, population decline, a lack of community identity and pride, and an absence of social cohesion have been long-standing concerns in many rural areas (Fullerton, 2015). Addressing the wide array of economic issues and concerns about community welfare in rural communities is a complex task that requires long-term and strategic planning in a variety of areas. It is essential that the institutions’ focus is not solely in economic returns but a much broader area of community welfare. Such considerations include the opportunities of education, recreation, and entertainment, social issues, public spirit, and community involvement.

In this regards, sport can be a powerful vehicle for enhancing community welfare, with particular reference to community identification and bonding (Zhang, Pease, & Hui, 1996). Further, sport teams can enhance a community’s aggregate level of social welfare when they support community building efforts and confront social issues (Sparvero & Chalip, 2007). To date, however, the majority of research regarding the impacts of sport team and its events on the community has focused predominantly upon professional teams in urban areas and mostly emphasis on the economic impacts. In contrast, the noneconomic impact of a minor league sport teams in rural areas upon the community has been overlooked issues. Although, claims of economic impacts associated with a local sport team in rural areas are anecdotal—typically less than expected, its organization, events, and facility together play an active role in energizing the community value innovation of the rural communities, eventually the improvement of communities’ quality of life.

Accordingly, the purpose of the present investigation is to bring theory and research together in the formulation of a conceptual model that illustrates the role of local sport team’s community value innovation. The model describes the psychological mechanisms of how residents’ perceived community value and benefits, generated by the team, influence their emotional/psychological well-being in a rural community. Development of the conceptual model also addresses two research questions. First, how do perceptions of community value and benefits affect rural community members’ sense of appreciation (gratitude) toward a local sport team? Second, how do perceptions of community value and benefit affect rural community members’ sense of community self-esteem and attachment?

A local sport team’s community value innovation efforts assist communities in achieving multiple goals. First, the provisions of sporting and non-sporting events (e.g., other unique entertainment presentations) organized and attracted to its facility by a team front office increase involvement of local residents in recreational activities. Participating in such activities change ordinary places into areas where people can share and build sense of excitement, friendship, and belonging (Oman, Jones, & Wilkes, 2006). In addition, the presence of a local sport team including its facility and events promotes culture of innovation by offering the various development opportunities for everyone involved. Although employment opportunities for the teams are limited—typically seasonal workforce—the provisions of individual career-oriented opportunities such as youth sport programs, volunteers, internships, and specific sport-related professional education and certificate programs (e.g., coach and officials) for the communities drive individuals’ future through networking and learning experiences and address their respective needs. Finally, local sport teams have enthusiastically been involved in socially responsible initiatives. These special community value innovation efforts organized by or through a local sport team help to address an array of social concerns involving quality of education, health, child care, and drug use (Sparvero & Chalip, 2007). A team’s involvement in socially responsible campaigns reinforces the desired community value and characters.

In the conceptual model, residents’ perceptions of community value innovation created by the local sport team shape a greater feeling of appreciation toward the team. According to McCullough, Kimeldorf, and Cohen, (2008),
gratitude arises when an individual perceives that he or she has received a social support and benefit from another social agent’s costly, intentional, voluntary action. Furthermore, Fredrickson (2004) remarked that one benefited from another person’s generosity formulates actions that—including, but not limited to the original benefactor—promote and sustain positive social relations and psychological well-being in our society. With this rationale in mind, feeling of gratitude can be expected to play a critical role in mediating the relationship between resident perceptions of a local sport team’s community value innovation efforts and their emotional/psychological well-being in the rural community. The theoretical support for the mediating role of gratitude is elucidated in terms of broaden-and-build theory. The central theme of the broaden-and-build theory is that each positive emotion broadens people’s modes of thinking and action, which in turn not only builds their enduring personal resources (e.g., prosocial behaviors) but also build and strengthen communities’ social resources (e.g., community solidarity and harmony) (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2004). In this sense, gratitude, considered as a distinct positive emotion, serves to build and strengthen residents’ a wide range of psychological well-being in the community as reflections of noticing and appreciating the positive in their community life. Therefore, residents who feel grateful toward the community value innovation efforts made by a local sport team have a greater sense of positive community self-esteem and attachment.

In the terms of urbanization in rural communities, community self-esteem and attachment are crucial facilitators for a number of reasons: enhancing a strong sense of pride in the community affects the retention of its population (Looker, 2014); having a strong feelings of belonging to the community can influence social interactional ties for participation in community group activities and events (Brehm, Eisenhauer, & Krannich, 2004); and having a strong sense of attachment to the community can also stimulate more interactions with localities when it comes to business (Theodori & Luloff, 2000). Indeed, rural communities have traditionally recognized that the community self-esteem and attachment is important in the development and refinement of rural communities.

Central to this current study was the effort to foster further development and refinement of the rural communities by recognizing an extensive contribution of a minor league sport team. The theoretical support of the conceptual model explicates that residents’ perception of positive emotion, gratitude, toward their local sport team’s community value innovation efforts leads to strengthening their community self-esteem and attachment. Moreover, the body of knowledge generated through this applied research provides varying aspects of contributions: (a) to shed light on a crucial community function of local sport teams in rural areas; (b) to expand the scope of previous research by applying the broaden-and-build theory to explain the psychological mechanisms; and (c) to inform and promote meaningful partnerships among sport organizations, nonprofit community organizations, and public administrations/policymakers in the region. The model explains how investments in community value innovation leads to achieving desired future rural characters. Hence, the findings serve as an overall road map for public administrations/policymakers in rural areas to better use and capitalize the community value innovation catalyzed by minor league sport teams, and to develop their strategic planning and community value in the challenged rural regions.