Empirical Article

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Exploring the Effect of Team Identification on International Students' Adjustment to Higher Education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

International students have been continuously transitioning to U.S. colleges in pursuit of high-quality education and social mobility opportunities. Multiple studies have dealt with the adjustment of international students in their process of transitioning to a new environment. The purpose of our study is to explore if college sports fan identification can contribute to this population's adjustment process. This study used lived experiences from 10 international graduate students regarding their college sports fan experiences and how that helped them adjust to American colleges. Results showed that answers from international students derived two themes: social and academic adjustments. Social adjustment was specified as a sense of belonging and academic adjustment was specified as finding a way to relax from their academic burden. The results of this study can help both the international student office and athletic departments to utilize college sports to help international students with their adjustment to their new environments.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning in the United States (U.S.) have been a popular destination for international students (Chin, 2004). According to the Institute of International Education's (IIE) report (2020), more than one million international students are studying at U.S. colleges and universities. International students choose to relocate to America for a wide variety of reasons, including high-quality education, social mobility, and diverse educational offerings (Altbach, 2004; Li & Stodolska, 2006). Although there are benefits to international students coming to America, previous studies have emphasized the hardships this population faces. International students not only have to adjust to new linguistic and cultural environments, but this population also faces feelings of insecurity and inadequacy (de Araujo, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). International students are said to experience deficient social support as well as self-defeating behaviors, such as homesickness and loneliness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003). Moreover, due to this population's dedication to academic success and career exploration, international students often experience feelings of guilt when participating in leisure activities (Guo & Ross, 2014; Li & Stodolska, 2006).

Sports participation can assist international students in adjusting to their new environment at colleges and universities in the U.S. (Allen et al., 2010; Gomez et al., 2014). For example, Gomez et al.'s (2014) study reported a causal relationship between international students' participation in sports activities on campus and their social adjustment. International students who participated in sports activities (between four to eight times per month) demonstrated an easier transitional process when adapting to a new environment as compared to those who did not participate in sports (Allen et al., 2010). Although previous work has demonstrated the benefits of sports participation for international students transitioning to U.S. colleges and universities, there is a gap in the literature regarding how sports fandom may help international students adjust to higher education is the U.S.

Sports fandom has been found to impact the student experience. Studies have demonstrated that the more students identify themselves as fans of their university's intercollegiate teams, the higher their sense of inclusion and social adjustment in the university setting (Clopton, 2007, 2008, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015). Koo et al. (2015) found that students tend to have greater personal self-esteem through higher fan identification, which eventually leads to positive social and emotional adjustment among college students. Such social and emotional adjustments ultimately lead to positive motivation for student's academic success. However, certain demographic variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, domestic, international) have been largely ignored by the literature.

While intercollegiate sports can serve as a unifying factor on many college campuses (Toma, 2003), college sports may also exclude members of the campus community (Harris, 1998; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Tonts, 2005). Hence, while the effect of intercollegiate sports fan identity to domestic students is evident through previous studies (Clopton, 2007, 2008; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015; Sung et al., 2015), literature has largely ignored the impact of fan identity on the international student population. Used in the aforementioned studies, the current study is informed by Tajfel`s (1978) social identity theory [SIT]. Based on a qualitative approach, the purpose of this study is to explore if following intercollegiate athletic programs assists international students in adjusting to higher education in the U.S. This study is guided by the following research question:

1. Do following intercollegiate sports assist international students with their adjustment to an institution of higher learning in the U.S.?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity and Team Identification

Team identification is a concept that originated from SIT. Derived from symbolic interactionism, SIT believes that individuals actively create their identities throughout their lives (Tafjel, 1978). Specifically, according to SIT, individuals choose which group they will identify themselves with while creating their identities. In other words, individuals will form an ingroup and/or outgroup by choosing which individuals they choose to identify themselves with. Individuals will then be attached to their selected group and continuously defining their identity inside the group (Foels, 2006). Furthermore, when an individual is attached to a particular group, it may benefit their self-esteem (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as individuals are more likely to share their concerns with cohorts in their chosen ingroup (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Brewer, 1979). Once individuals become a member of a particular group, it is more likely they will continuously cultivate their membership mentality by defining ingroup members as "us" and by differentiating those from outgroups as "them." For example, Clopton (2008) found sports fans from the South formed a stronger ingroup (i.e., sense of community) than those from the North.

An ingroup (in which individuals define their identity) is often referred to as collective identity (Ashmore et al., 2004; Heere & James, 2007a) or group identity (Ashforth & Mael,1989). However, previous SIT research also analyzed how such emotional attachments and the forming of identity within an ingroup can cause individuals to form bias within ingroups and disparage those from outgroups (DeVries, 2003; Hogg & Adams, 1990). Hence, if one cannot build an ingroup within their communities and are considered as an outgroup by another individual an individual who does not form an ingroup will be reluctant to receive the benefit of being in an ingroup (DeVries, 2003; Hogg & Adams, 1990).

Team identification applies SIT's ingroup concept to sports fandom in that ingroup members may become emotionally attached to other ingroup members (Heere & James, 2007b). According to previous research, sports teams have fans with different team identification levels. Intercollegiate sports teams, specifically, are unique in that fans are students and alumni (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Wann (2000) defined students in higher education as a fan segment that are more likely to actively identify themselves with a specific intercollegiate sports team and not only form an ingroup with those who follow the same team as them, but also interact positively within the ingroup. Specifically, in intercollegiate sports settings, students express their fan identity towards their team and unite with those members who follow the same team and differentiate themselves from fans of rival institutions (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Due to this specialty, previous research has used college students as a sample to analyze the effect of this population's team identification on the verbal recommendation of the college sports to friends (Swanson et al., 2003).

Team Identification Impact on School Adjustment

Much research has been done to define the relationship between team identification and social/emotional adjustment of students (Clopton, 2007, 2008; Clopton and Bourke, 2011; Clopton and Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015; Sung et al., 2015). Student's fan identification towards their college sports team was identified as one of the factors that can help social adjustment by building a sense of community and social capital (Clopton, 2007; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010). Fan identification was also used in studies to demonstrate its causal relationship with social and emotional adjustment with the moderating effect of personal self-esteem (Koo et al., 2015; Sung et al., 2015). Previous research has also demonstrated that individuals with higher team identification are more likely to experience psychological well-being (e.g., higher self-esteem, sense of belonging, positive mindset) (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, 2006). Additionally, according to the Psychological Health Model, higher team identification cultivates more social and emotional rapport with ingroup cohorts and ultimately leads to increased psychological well-being

(Wann, 2006). Therefore, while studies dealt with the effect of student's fan identification on their adjustment to campus, the international student population has been largely ignored (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Clopton, 2007, 2008; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015; Sung et al., 2015; Wann, 2006). Hence, there is a need to analyze whether international students can also utilize fan identification to assist with their adjustment to campus environments.

International Student's Difficulties Transitioning to Higher Education in the U.S.

The social and academic adjustments are the processes that international students must experience when transitioning to higher education institutions in the U.S. (Baker & Siryk, 1984a, 1984b; Gerdes & Mallinkrodt, 1994; Gong & Fan, 2006; Kagnici, 2012; Kalpidou et al., 2011). Social adjustment is defined as a process that includes fitting or coping into a host country, building or retaining new societal relations, and cultivating a sense of belonging (Gong & Fan, 2006; Kagnici, 2012; Kalpidou et al., 2011). Studies defined academic adjustment as a student's motivation, accomplishment, commitment to campus, working to meet the academic requirement, getting to learn the objective of studying, and general gratification towards the academic activities on campus (Baker & Siryk, 1984a, 1984b; Gerdes & Mallinkrodt, 1994).

Past literature has focused on the social support that international students receive regarding the difficulty of cultural and academic adjustment (Bastien et al., 2018; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Poyrazli et al., 2001). When international students receive social support from their academic program(s), they are more likely to demonstrate increased academic performance and psychological well-being (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). In addition to social support, on-campus social event(s) was also found to help international student's social adjustment to campus (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ramsay et al., 2007). Bastien et al. (2018) mentioned that for international students to adjust to a foreign academic environment successfully, this population must learn and comprehend the social and cultural differences in their new environment. Previous research on the international student population often examines the academic success of this population when compared to their domestic student peers (Bastien et al., 2018; Korobova & Starobin, 2015). However, for international students, previous research has implied that the cultural differences they experience in foreign higher education may cause academic adjustment difficulties (Poyrazli et al., 2001). Studies have also shown international students' obsession with academic success hinders them from participating in leisure. The question then is whether taking part in college athletic fandom can help with international students` adjustment to their educational environment (Li & Stodolska, 2007; Zhao et al., 2005).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative methodology. Specifically, an open-ended questionnaire that consisted of three demographic questions (e.g., where are you from), as well as seven questions (e.g., can you describe your experience as a sports fan) that related to the adjustment and sports fan experience of the participants and the content of the questionnaires were analyzed using Elo et al.`s (2014) check list.

Data Collection

Convenience sampling, which enabled the primary researcher to recruit research participants based on their place of origin, availability, as well as a direct relation with the research question, was utilized to recruit participants (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Ten international graduate students at a public land grant institution in the Southeastern United States participated in this study (see Table 1). The institution is a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I membership institution and is in a Power Five athletic conference.

Table 1: Participant Demographics (By Years in the U.S.)

Years in the U.S.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Continent of origin	Class Level	Major
1	Javier	24	Male	South America	Master	Civil Engineering
1	Ben	25	Male	Europe 1	Master	Industrial Engineering
1	Chavarin	27	Male	Central America 1	Ph.D.	Environmental Dynamics
1	Alexis	25	Male	Asia 1	Master	Agricultural Economics/ Agribusiness
2	Jasmine	24	Female	Europe 2	Ph.D.	Food Science
2	Paulo	28	Male	Central America 2	Master	Electrical Engineering
2	Stephanie	26	Female	Central America 3	Master	Cell and Molecular Biology
2	Antonio	31	Male	Asia 2	Ph.D.	Cell and Molecular Biology
2	Dimitri	29	Male	Asia 3	Ph.D.	Economics
4	Marina	32	Female	Asia 4	Ph.D.	Biological Science

Data Analysis

Responses to the open-ended questionnaire were sorted into categories, connected with related categories, and as a result, themes that connect the categories were developed. The responses to the open-ended questionnaire were sorted by each question and were saved in one transcript. The transcript was coded following three phases namely open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The research team utilized Elo et al.'s (2014) checklist, which consisted of three phases (i.e., preparation, organization, reporting) for improving credibility for qualitative work that utilized content analysis. Further, due to potential language barriers, trustworthiness was achieved through member checking as well as triangulation of coding. Upon the participants submitting their questionnaires, the primary researcher reached out to the participants to ensure their words were accurately reflected. This technique is considered to be critical when establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Liconln & Guba, 1985). Upon receiving all the data, the triangulation of coding took place when three experienced qualitative researchers examined data and collectively finalized the codes (Oleinik, 2011).

RESULTS

Ten international graduate students shared their lived experiences on how social identity as an intercollegiate sports fan helped shape their adjustment to campus. Throughout the data, two major themes emerged: social adjustment and academic adjustment.

Social Adjustment

According to the data, following college sports assisted the participants with their social adjustment to campus. Most of the participants shared how following college sports provided them opportunities to meet new people. Jasmine described her experience with college sports as an opportunity that helped her meet people, make friends, and associate with people from different backgrounds. Dimitri further elaborated on how following college sports helped him feel a part of the campus community:

Two of the Ph.D. students in my cohort are local students. They invite me to the college games where they usually throw a tailgate. I like going out in the crowd and cheer. That is a good way to understand the community and campus sports culture. Alexis also provided his opinion on how being a college sports fan not only helps students meet with new people but also provided a platform for international students to share their culture(s):

> Being a college sports fan, especially for the local community, is a big deal. Being part of this community is a fantastic experience as you can meet many new people, make new friends and exchange culture with each other and learn new things. Apart from academic experience, college sports and the community within will give a tremendous experience for all international and local students.

Social adjustment came out as an umbrella theme, which was categorized as an opportunity for students to meet with new people and further informed the sub-theme of a sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging appeared as a subtheme under social adjustment. The participants emphasized how they felt that they belonged to a community when they followed the college sports team with their peers. Jasmine mentioned observing the strong bond between the sports team and the students on campus, expressing that identifying with the university's sports team promoted unity on campus and in the community. Stephanie also mentioned she felt a sense of pride wearing the school's colors, explaining she was a sports fan and enjoyed cheering for her university. For Stephanie, being a fan of her university's athletic teams made her feel a part of the "tradition" of the campus. For Ben attending athletic events and cheering on his university's sports teams made him feel like he belonged to a community and shared a connection with the community through his fandom:

> Identifying as a college sports fan helped to feel that you (are) part of a bigger group and to have people around that have something in common. It definitely helped to feel like part of the campus community from the very beginning. Especially the tradition of chanting together created some sense of connection among the students.

Dimitri supported other participants' opinions by mentioning how being a sports fan helped him feel integrated into the campus sports culture in the U.S.

Academic Adjustment

Participants' answers were able to derive academic adjustment as a second major theme. The participants explained that following the intercollegiate athletic teams on their campus assisted in their overall academic adjustment. Ben shared how he thought following college sports directly helped his academic adjustment, and since he was able to easily acclimate to campus, it assisted with his social adjustment. As Ben felt comfortable on campus and was able to make friends by investing in the university's athletic teams, Ben felt that he had more time to focus on academics. Connecting social and academic adjustment, Javier also mentioned how his sports fan identity allowed him to form a study group:

It certainly has helped me with my academic adjustment, especially social adjustment, since one cannot do everything by his own. Sometimes one needs help from someone else, and that is why it is necessary to have friends to count on. I would say, following the college sport teams or at least knowing a little about them is a good way to be part of a conversation and start new friendships and increase one's social circle.Similarly, Stephanie connected with her friends, and together, they would attend various athletic events. Due to this social connection, Stephanie also formed a study group with her friends. Stephanie emphasized how the emotional support that she received helped her finish assignments and focus on reaching her ultimate goal of earning her degree in America.

Antonio mentioned how he was struggling in some courses; however, like Stephanie, Antonio formed a study group with those who he attended athletic events with as well.

Relaxation

Relaxation emerged as a sub-theme of academic adjustment. The participants expressed that following the athletic teams at their university allowed them to relax and ultimately take a break from studying. For the participants, attending athletic events or watching their school play on television provided them a place to get away from academic pressure. Alexis insisted the break college sport provided international students positively contributed to academic success:

> The college sports team provides a perfect platform for local and international students to make friends. When you are tired of research and study at the weekend, watching a football game with friends gives you positive energy for the rest of the week. As a result, you will do well with your academic grades and, in the meantime, emotionally stable.

For Antonio, studying felt easier when he could take a break and attend an athletic event. Jasmine agreed, feeling more productive when she had a break from studying by going to an athletic event. For Marina, going to a college sports game helped her feel better:

> My academic life has always been a top priority since I came to the United States, so accomplishing course work and other requirements did not depend on my extra-curricular activities. However, it does make academic and everyday life seem better when you have something to look forward to- like a Wednesday evening volleyball game on campus.

DISCUSSION

Fan identity, which has derived from SIT, is often used in higher education research to measure the effect of student's identification towards their college sports team as well as their social and academic adjustment (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Koo et al., 2015; Wann, 2006). While previous research focused on domestic students, the sample in the present study felt that fan identity also contributed to international students' social and academic adjustment. In the present study, social adjustment was generally indicated by how the participants utilized college sports to meet new people and make friends. Social adjustment through college sports allowed the participants in the present study to feel a sense of community. Further, the participants expressed that the social support they gained through supporting their institutions' athletic teams ultimately helped them to adjust to campus academically.

Social Adjustment

The present study appears to be in line with previous research that mentioned students' team identification with their affiliated intercollegiate sports team affected students' social adjustment to campus (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Koo et al., 2015). Although previous research was done with mostly domestic students (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Koo et al., 2015), the participants in the current study found intercollegiate sports were helpful to international students' adjustment to campus as well. In other words, not only do intercollegiate sports assist domestic students with their social adjustment, for the participants in this study, they assisted them with their transition and adjustment to a new environment. The participants in the present study also expressed that following college sports enabled international students to meet with new people in/outside the campus and assisted with their social adjustment to campus. As collegiate sports are a part of the campus culture in the U.S. (Clopton, 2007, 2008; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015); using college sports to assist international students adjust to life at U.S. colleges and universities might be a viable strategy.

Sense of Belonging

Our results were in line with prior research on how international student's connectedness to campus was a significant factor in predicting their adjustment to campus (Bastien et al., 2018). For the participants in the present study, attending athletic events and rooting for their institution's athletic teams made them feel connected to campus and led to a feeling of being a part of the campus community. This finding is also supported by past studies that mentioned participating in on-

campus social events has a significant effect on international students' social adjustment to campus (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ramsay et al., 2007). Participants were able to provide their thoughts on how international students' participation in one of the biggest on-campus events, college sports, helped them adjust to campus socially. Therefore, this study adds to the previous literature in that international students can potentially utilize college sports fan identification for their social adjustment to campus (Clopton, 2007; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010).

Academic Adjustment

This study mimicked previous studies in that international students' academic adjustment is connected to social support (Bastien et al., 2018; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Poyrazli et al., 2001). According to our results, international students were able to gain social support by forming social ingroup with their peers. Participants demonstrated how they utilized watching college sports together to form a social ingroup. With the support international students received, they were able to focus on their studies and strive for graduation. Moreover, previous research that dealt with mostly domestic students also mentioned how students' fan identification showed a significant effect on academic performance when mediated by a sense of belonging to campus (Sung et al., 2015). Hence, promoting college sports to international students is highly suggested as a way to create social support with the whole campus community and help this population's academic adjustment.

Relaxation

The results of the present study did not appear to be in line with previous work regarding the notion that international students are obsessed with their academic pursuit at higher education institutions is the U.S. and do not participate in leisure activities as much as their domestic counterparts (Li & Stodolska, 2007; Zhao et al., 2005). Although volumes of previous studies mentioned how international students undergo adjustment stresses in several areas, including academic adjustments (de Araujo, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006), the previous study mentioned that international students need to find a place for relaxation during their adjustment to a new environment for the sake of their health (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). For the sake of lessening this stress, previous research suggested that an international student's self-care, time, and stress management is needed (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Gomez et al. (2014) also indicated that recreation participation did not have a negative effect on international student's academic adjustment. In this sense, college sports perhaps can be an escape for international students to enjoy high-quality entertainment without leaving campus. Hence, utilizing the benefits of intercollegiate sports can be one of the various ideal options to help international students relax from their academic burden.

IMPLICATIONS and CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explore if following intercollegiate athletic programs assisted international students in adjusting to higher education is the U.S. For the international students participating in this study, associating with their institution's athletic teams assisted this population in adjusting to campus socially and academically. More specifically, participants shared how they feel a sense of belonging by being connected to their athletic team, and in fact, such connection allowed them to relax from their academic burden(s).

Although the findings from the present study can be applicable to international students, the findings cannot and should not be generalized. This sample included in the present study consisted of 10 international graduate students at one university. As such, the fact that only graduate students were included, and the sample was at one institution should be viewed as a limitation. The sampling technique is also a limitation. Finally, the primary researcher is also an international graduate student who is a fan of collegiate sports. Although the primary researcher cooperated with three qualitative research experts to restrain bias, the primary researcher's status cannot be ignored

Future Directions

Following the results of our study, the researchers recommend that college sports should be utilized to foster international student's adjustment to campus. The athletic department can contribute to fostering international students' social adjustment by providing events that help international students learn about intercollegiate sports culture in the U.S. and help this population feel more connected to campus. As the U.S. sports model is unique, promoting intercollegiate sports to the international community would help this population get involved on campus. Hence, it is suggested that the international students` office (ideally with the athletic department) fosters opportunities for both domestic and international students to form groups and watch college sports together.

Athletic departments can also market different sports (e.g., soccer, swimming) to international students. This study demonstrates that this population is interested in going to various colleges' athletic events, such as tennis, soccer, volleyball, etc. As such, perhaps athletic departments can focus on bringing more of this population into the games. Athletic departments can host international student games. Further, athletic departments can promote diversity and inclusion by working with international students and creating awareness for their cultures. For example, the month of May is Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. Perhaps athletic departments can have an Asian culture appreciation day at a spring sporting event in partnership with the Asian student association on campus.

The lack of literature regarding sport fandom and international students provides a huge opportunity for future scholarship. Future research should include quantitative studies (of both graduate and undergraduate students) with a significant number of international students at various U.S. universities allowing for generalizable results. A larger qualitative study would also allow researchers to look at certain sub-groups of international students (e.g., European, Australian, Asian) and determine if there is a difference in groups regarding fandom. Future research should also examine what sports (e.g., football, soccer) this population is attending to assist with marketing efforts. The present study showed that being a sports fan actually assisted international students with their academic adjustment. Future work should examine sport fandom and academic success of this population. Further, future work should look at international students and donor intentions. Lastly, research is needed to better understand how colleges and universities are using intercollegiate sport to attract and retain international students.

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