



Cultural Identity

Sport as a vehicle for socialization and maintenance of cultural identity: International students attending American universities

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 May 2009

Received in revised form 15 September 2009

Accepted 1 January 2010

Keywords:

Cultural identity

Multicultural environment

International students

Recreational sport

ABSTRACT

Immigrants can utilize sport as a vehicle for maintaining cultural identity. Conversely, sport participation provides immigrants with opportunities for adopting an entirely new culture. Previous research also suggests that sport provides individuals with opportunities for attaining social capital. While this can be a beneficial situation for some individuals, sport is also promoting elitism and serving as a powerful mechanism for exclusion. Globalization has led large numbers of foreign nationals to seek educational opportunities in the United States. Due to the increase in the number of international students and the lack of empirical studies, the need to study their participation in sport is greater than ever. It is critical that sport managers ensure that these students are provided opportunities for socialization and cultural expression through sport. Thus far, there have been no holistic approaches that have examined international students with regards to socialization, cultural identity, and adaptation to multicultural environments through sport. The present study is grounded in sociological theories that are widely recognized. For the purpose of the study, a scale measuring cultural identity and adaptation to multicultural environments was developed based on literature review, exploratory factor analysis, and parallel analysis. The two factors retained; cultural maintenance through sport and adaptation to a multicultural environment through sport, were found to be valid and reliable measures of sport participation behavior among international students in the United States. A MANOVA test revealed that males scored significantly higher on the cultural maintenance through sport factor than females. Practitioners involved in campus recreational sport are encouraged to utilize findings from the current study to enhance their programming efforts for international students. Furthermore, implications for sport managers are discussed with regards to promoting cultural diversity and inclusion.

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1. Introduction

Sport is one of the few social activities of human beings that can be recognized in virtually every community and culture around the globe as a vehicle for bringing people together (Eitzen & Sage, 2003). For many, their sport participation is motivated by a desire to be a part of a cohesive group and internalize feelings of belonging. Some participants may only consider health benefits or enjoyment when engaging in sport, but for many the experience is intrinsically connected to their

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identity and self-concept (Weiss, 2001). Consequently, sport can be utilized as a way of maintaining one's cultural identity (Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004).

On the other hand, sport can be a vehicle for exclusion and can promote elitism. Those who participate in the culturally dominant sport are awarded with more opportunities for socialization and have greater access to valuable social capital and power (Light & Kirk, 2001). For example, private schools "of the social elite have been identified as key institutions through which families and social groups reproduce social advantage" (Light & Kirk, 2001, p. 81). Former rugby players from elite private schools that rise to positions of power in the corporate world are inclined to employ and establish business contacts with other former players who share similar values and behaviors. As a result of their similar background, former players appear more apt at acclimating themselves within the culture of the firm.

Individuals who are excluded from participating in sport may miss valuable opportunities for socialization, education, and even professional development (Majumdar, 2003). The economically privileged, affluent division of society dominates Indian cricket. Shortly after India gained its independence in 1947, corporate sponsors transformed cricket into a preserve of the educated elite and relatively affluent (Majumdar, 2003). Companies that employ cricket players have clear policies regarding their recruitment. They are concerned with employing educated men that will continue to benefit the corporation upon retiring from the sport. Academic qualifications play an important role in determining a player's salary. Additionally, cricket clubs charge high fees, allowing the wealthy to monopolize the sport by preventing underprivileged Indians from playing. It is important to understand what connects certain groups of people to particular sports activities and what role these play in the reproduction of social and economic inequalities in a given society (Washington & Karen, 2001). Responsible sport managers must consider the profound relationship between sport participation and social capital. Understanding this relationship allows sport managers to recognize the importance of including underrepresented socio-cultural groups.

Globalization, which has often simply meant Westernization, fosters homogenous societies by marginalizing traditional cultures and ethnic communities (Hochschild, 2006). Despite the fact that sport can be used to promote conformity and express western views, sport can also provide minority groups and foreign nationals with opportunities for keeping cultural ties strong (Giossos, 2008; Lee, 2005). International sporting events such as the Olympics, FIFA World Cup, or the Pan-American games provide a platform for participants and spectators to maintain and express their cultural affiliation. Globalization has also led large numbers of foreign nationals to seek educational opportunities in the United States (Yoh, Yang, & Gordon, 2008). According to the Institute of International Education (2008), there were 623,805 international students enrolled at American universities for the 2007–2008 academic year (n.p.). For many of these students, obtaining a quality education and developing a lucrative career path is the primary motive for relocating to the United States (Li & Stodolska, 2006). However, it is important that these students are provided opportunities for socialization, cultural expression, and maintenance of physical health (Yoh, Yang, & Gordon, 2008). Recreational sport can serve a multidimensional role for international students. For some, sport may simply be an activity to stay physically fit. Others may utilize sport to retain a sense of their homeland by engaging in a familiar recreational activity with other international students of the same or similar cultural heritage. Also, there may be some international students who view sport participation as an opportunity for adapting to their new surroundings and new culture.

While there have been numerous studies examining the role of sport in the lives' of immigrants (Harrolle & Trail, 2007; Pons, Laroche, Nyeck, & Perreault, 2001; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004), currently, there is a gap in the body of research as only a few studies have focused specifically on international students. Research that has focused on international students has either concentrated exclusively on one nationality group or strictly examined frequency of participation (Lee, 2005; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Yoh et al., 2008). Thus, there have been no holistic approaches that have examined international students with regards to socialization, cultural identity, and adaptation to multicultural environments through sport. Due to the increase in the number of international students and the lack of empirical studies, the need to study their participation in sport is greater than ever. Also, it is important to note that international students are temporary residents rather than immigrants; further justifying the need for the current study. Currently, there is not a scale available for researchers interested in examining factors of cultural maintenance and adaptation to multicultural environments through sport as they pertain specifically to international students. The purpose of this study was twofold. The first purpose of the study was to develop a valid and reliable instrument that can be utilized for understanding sport consumer behavior among international students attending American universities as it relates to socialization, cultural identity, and adaptation to a multicultural environment. The second purpose of the study was to provide an examination of international students' sport participation with regards to maintenance of cultural identity and adaptation to a multicultural environment. The international students were categorized into the following nationality groups: Asian, South Asian, Latin American, European, United Kingdom/Canada/Australia, Middle-Eastern, and African. An online survey instrument was sent via the academic institution's international studies office. Four American universities participated in the study; two from the South, one from the Mid-West, and one from the West. Results from this study will enable American universities to better understand the unique characteristics of international students and their active participation in recreational sport. Thus, sport can be better utilized as a vehicle for the inclusion of diverse populations into the larger campus community. Furthermore, this study obtained important information for practitioners involved in programming recreational sport, thus enhancing their ability to target this growing market segment.

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