Exploring the Impact of Fan Identification and Leisure Participation on International Students’ Acculturation

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According to a report provided by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 2020, the total number of international students in the U.S. is about one million, consisting of about 5.5% of total U.S. enrolment in higher education. This population contributes to the U.S. in economic and cultural enrichment aspects (Knight, 2004; NAFSA, 2018). Although their total number is growing every year, there remain hardships for these students during their transition to the U.S. (de Araujo, 2011; Gallagher, 2013).

Berry (1997) defined the transition process that international students experience as acculturation, which accompanies a transition in values, beliefs, and behaviors derived from constant influence between two or more cultures. During the transition, international students experience stress accompanied by anxiety, depression, anger, identity confusion, and family conflict (Berry et al., 1987).

Previous literature utilized participation in social or sports activities as strategies to cope with acculturation stress for international students (Gomez et al., 2014; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Ra & Trusty, 2017). However, although watching and becoming a fan of college sports were shown to help domestic students’ adjustment to campus (Clopton & Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015), fan identification has not been utilized much as a strategy for international students’ acculturation into a new environment. Hence, this study aimed to add fan identification towards international students' college sports teams on their acculturation strategies along with sports and social activity participation.

For data collection, the researchers sent out an online survey that consisted of Spectator Sport Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), sports and social activity participation questionnaire (Ragheb, 1980), and Acculturation and Resiliency Scale (AARS) (Khawaja et al., 2014) to international students enrolled in one of Division 1 power-5 conference affiliated colleges. A total of 94 international students participated in this research.

A Pearson’s correlation matrix revealed a significant correlation between fan identification and acculturation ($r (92) = .28, p = .006$). Social activity participation also showed significant correlation with acculturation ($r (92) = .32, p = .002$). Sports participation did not show significant correlation with acculturation ($r (92) = .13, p = .22$). Hence, researchers removed sports participation from regression analysis due to a lack of a significant correlation with acculturation. Regression analysis was used to analyze the causal relationship between fan identification, social activity participation and acculturation. Results indicated a significant regression equation ($F (2, 91) = 8.13, p = .001$), with an effect size of 15%.

These results call for attention to how fan identification can be utilized in international student's acculturation literature. This study shows that both international and domestic students can benefit from being a fan of college sports. Practical implication included providing free tickets to revenue-generating sports for a group of both international and domestic students. This way, both international and domestic students can have cultural exchange by teaching and learning about one's culture while finding an additional way to adjust to a new environment. This study acts as a foundational study that analyzed the causal relationship between the international student's fan identification and acculturation.