Article

Analyzing International Students' Social Support Through Intercollegiate Sport Team Identification

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ABSTRACT

International students often experience difficulties acclimating to campus climates in the United States. While identifying oneself as a fan of college sports has been shown to assist domestic students in their social adjustment to college environments, little is known about the relationship between international students' college sports team identification and their social adjustment. As such, the purpose of this study is to determine the effect of team identification on international students' sense of community and social capital and the conceptual relationship between the sense of community and social capital. Analysis of the hypothesized model with a sample of international students (n = 487) revealed that international students' team identification develops their sense of community and social capital. Implications focused on how the international student office and athletic departments can utilize intercollegiate sports to support international students and assist this population in adapting to campus life in the United States.

Keywords: international student, sense of community, social capital, team identification

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that international students experience difficulties adjusting to campus climates in the United States (Gold, 2016; Ma, 2020; Mukminin, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Telbis et al., 2014; Xing & Bolden,

2019). Furthermore, the transitional process that international students experience is different than that of their domestic peers (Gomez et al., 2014; Gong & Fan, 2006; Kagnici, 2012; Kalpidou et al., 2011). Studies (e.g., de Araujo, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006) have shown that both domestic and international student populations experienced a change in their social roles upon entering higher education; however, international students must adapt to linguistically and culturally unfamiliar conditions as well. Such conditions may decrease international students' feelings of self-worth, causing this population to feel inadequate and insecure (de Araujo, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

This adjustment can be explained by previous research from Berry (1997), who defined acculturation as the process migrants face adapting to a different cultural environment. When individuals are under the acculturation process, they experience stressors that can cause anxiety, depression, anger, and identity confusion (Berry et al., 1987; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). Studies have shown that the social support migrants received from their community was one of the major factors that helped lessen the acculturative stress this population faced (Luo et al., 2019; Ra & Trusty, 2017; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Yeh & Inose, 2003). In other words, individuals with a large and stable social network providing affluent social support have less stress during the adjustment process (Steinglass et al., 1985). In contrast, individuals who lose their social network and support transitioning to the U.S. are more likely to experience negative psychological well-being (Constantine et al., 2005; Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Studies (e.g., Clopton, 2007; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Koo et al., 2015; Sung et al., 2015) have repeatedly demonstrated that team identification assists in students' social adjustment to college environments. More specifically, students who followed their college athletic team(s) have been shown to experience an increased sense of community and were able to build social capital (Clopton, 2007; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010). While various studies provide examples of how students' sports spectatorship can benefit their social adjustment (Clopton, 2007; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Wann, 2006), most of these studies fail to include international students.

Although studies have demonstrated that international students' participation in physical activities can increase social support (Kutintara & Min, 2016; Ra & Trusty, 2017), there is little evidence that demonstrates the influence of sports spectatorship on international students. Stodolska and Tainsky (2015) found that "soccer spectatorship in the context of a sports bar not only helped to establish and nurture connections among immigrant Latinos, but fostered their sense of national and panethnic identity and pride" (p. 155). However, immigrants' and international students' lifestyles differ. Immigrants seek to make their living in a new environment, whereas international students strive to acquire a degree; therefore, studies should not be generalized to all international populations (Gomez et al., 2014; Stodolska & Tainsky, 2015). A qualitative study by Kim et al. (2022) is the only study that attempts to examine the influence of college sports on international students. According to Kim et al. (2022), international graduate

students found community and a sense of belonging by watching intercollegiate sports. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the effect of team identification on international students' sense of community and social capital, as well as the conceptual relationship between the sense of community and social capital.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

Team Identification
Team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) was derived from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), which perpetuates that an individual's conception of oneself can be divided into personal and social identity. More specifically, one's affiliation or membership with a certain group of major interest is found to affect an individual's perception of self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). In lieu of social identity theory, Wann and Branscombe (1993) developed team identity theory, which explained how an individual's identification with a sport team could influence self-perception (Lock & Heere, 2017). Through team identification, an individual may develop a social identification and a sense of perceived belongingness to a group of peers who are also fans of the same team of interest (Mael & Ashforth, 2001). Additionally, those with high team identification have been shown to have increased social well-being after experiencing a stressful event (e.g., natural disasters) (Inoue & Havard, 2015).

Sense of Community
First developed by Sarason (1974) and then refined by McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of community (SOC) is "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). SOC encompasses five concepts: membership, influence, integration, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is important to note that an individual's perception of SOC can differ based on the context, as SOC is a collective, fundamental experience all societies experience (Hill, 1996; Puddifoot, 1996; Peterson et al., 2008). SOC has been applied to various contexts, including how campus communities such as college athletes, college sports fans, and sports participants develop their sense of community through sports (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013; Warner et al., 2012), how immigrant communities form their sense of community with their ethnic or receiving communities (Kwak, 2018; Sonn, 2002), and how residents grow a sense of community with their residing cities (Davidson & Cotter, 1986; Yu et al., 2019). In the case of international students, participation in a classroom activity designed to foster interaction between domestic and international students has been shown to

positively affect international students' sense of community on campus (Caligrui et al., 2020).

Social Capital

Nahpiet and Ghoshal (1998) defined social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit" (p. 243). Moreover, according to Putnam's (2000) later definition, social capital is "[C]onnections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). More specifically, Putnam (2000) separated the concept into two components: bonding and bridging capital. Bonding social capital explains how homogeneous social networks' members are connected through their shared values and characteristics. As a result, group members with strong bonding social capital are brought together and have strong perceived bonding among members. On the other hand, bridging social capital explains how a social network beyond one's homogeneous group is created. Consequently, bridging social capital extends one's network outside their homogeneous group and helps an individual adjust to a new group or environment (Putnam, 2000).

Woolcock (1998) insisted that "Definitions of social capital should focus on its sources rather than its consequences" (p. 35). In lieu of Woolcock's (1998) notion, studies have examined the relationship between sense of community and social capital (Capriano & Hystad, 2011; Lochner et al., 1999; Tamalge et al., 2017), finding that sense of community is indeed a segment of social capital. A study by Lochner et al. (1999) found that social capital may partially include the aspect of one's psychological sense of community. Capriano and Hystad's (2011) study showed that one's perceived sense of community reflects their social capital in their neighborhood. Finally, based on Perkins et al.'s (2002) conceptual definition of psychological social capital, Talmage et al. (2017) explained that a sense of community is one of the cognitions related to one's social capital and shared how an individual's sense of community can boost the overall community's well-being. In this sense, international students' involvement in various campus organizations, such as service, professional, or ethnic organizations, assists in developing their social capital on campus (Glass & Gesing, 2018).

The Effect of Team Identification on Sense of Community and Social Capital

Among various stakeholders, college sports provide a platform for community building (Toma, 1998). Previous studies have analyzed students' social outcomes (e.g., sense of community and social capital) and college sport team identification (Clopton 2008; Clopton & Finch, 2009). Research has demonstrated that students with deep psychological connections with their college sports teams experience a higher sense of campus community and social capital (Clopton 2008; Clopton & Finch, 2009).

Early studies have demonstrated that college football can serve as a surrogate, allowing various stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, alumni) to create shared

identities and increased social connections (Clopton, 2009; Katz et al., 2017; Smith, 1988; Toma, 1998). In addition, students have been found to enjoy the social connection college sports provide, leading to a profound perceived connection and sense of belongingness to their institution (Clopton, 2008; Heere & Katz, 2014; Katz & Heere, 2016; Sung et al., 2015). However, an antecedent exists as one needs to experience positive interactions among peers or friends to enjoy the benefits of identification within the collegiate sport setting (Katz & Heere, 2016; Koo et al., 2015).

Identifying with local sports teams can create bonding and bridging social capital (Atherley, 2006; Tonts, 2005; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Walseth, 2008). Specifically, bonding social capital can be developed through sport by promoting group or community members' sense of identity within a group, which leads to a stronger or more dense network with the members who share similar identities or are more homogeneous with one another (Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Tonts, 2005). Sports can also generate another type of social capital, bridging social capital, which can bring together heterogeneous community members with diverse (e.g., age, class, ethnicity, race) characteristics (Harris, 1998; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Tonts, 2005).

Furthermore, Clopton and Finch (2011) utilized the term social anchor to explain how institutions (e.g., educational, physical, social, economic) can support creating or maintaining community members' social capital. Additionally, Katz and Clopton (2014) and Stensland et al. (2019) found that higher education institutions and their athletic departments can serve as social anchors, leading to the notion that college sports can be adopted to promote various stakeholders' social capital.

However, college sports cannot be the panacea for developing international students' sense of community and social capital, as disputes exist in academia regarding the effect of team identification on one's sense of community and social capital (Lim et al., 2011; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Tonts, 2005; Warner et al., 2011). For instance, in some cases, identifying with a certain sports team is said to develop excessive bonding of the fan community by excluding those who do not share the same fan identity (Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Tonts, 2005). Moreover, college students who were passive spectators to their college sports team were shown not to form a sense of community through team identification (Lim et al., 2011; Warner et al., 2011).

In addition, disputes also exist on the merits of being a sports fan. Studies have found that being a member of sports fandom may cause one to develop aggressive and unhealthy behaviors, such as excessive consumption of fast foods (Branscome & Wann, 1992; Inoue et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies have also found that identifying with a distant sports team does not significantly affect one's psychological health compared to identifying with a local sports team (Wann et al., 1999, 2004; Wann, 2006).

Hence, based on previous studies regarding the effect of team identification on one's sense of community and social capital, as well as the conceptual relationship between the sense of community and social capital, this study

analyzed the following research hypotheses (see Figure 1 for the hypothesized model):

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were proposed:

H$_1$:   International students' team identification will have a significant positive causal effect on their perceived sense of community on campus.

H$_2$:   International students' team identification will have a significant positive causal effect on their perceived social capital on campus.

H$_3$:   International students' perceived sense of community on campus will have a significant mediating effect between international students' college sports team identification and perceived social capital on campus.
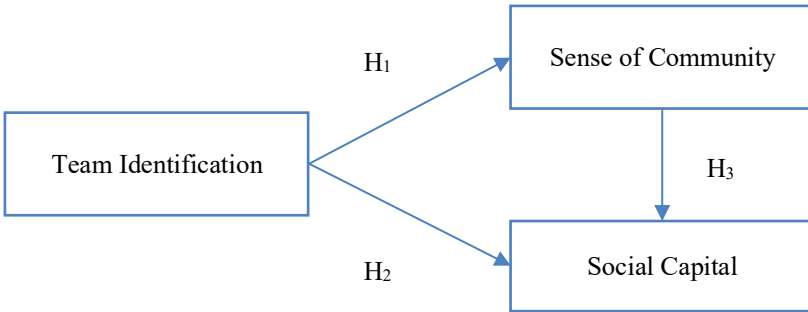
Figure 1 : Hypothesized International Students' Team Identification and Social Output Model

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

After receiving IRB approval, purposeful sampling was utilized to recruit participants. A recruitment letter and survey (consisting of 48 items) were sent out to all 65 National College Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I 'Power 5' institutions' international student offices. The data were collected through the online survey platform Qualtrics from February to April 2021. The survey was developed and administered in English, consisted of 48 items, and required approximately 15 minutes to complete. Initially, 687 students responded to the survey. After excluding those who had incomplete responses (75; 10.92%) or failed to identify as current international students in the U.S. (125; 18.20%), a total of 487 international students from 25 institutions were included for further analysis in this study. A majority of participants were female (53.8%), graduate-

level students (81.5%), and enrolled in South Eastern Conference (SEC)-affiliated universities (68.99%). The other demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : *Demographic Characteristics (N = 487)*

Characteristics	*n*	`%
Conference		
SEC	336	68.99
Big 12	91	18.69
Big 10	40	8.21
ACC	15	3.08
Pac-12	5	1.03
Gender		
Male	223	45.79
Female	262	53.80
Other	2	0.41
Academic level		
Undergraduate	90	18.48
Graduate	397	81.52

Note: SEC = Southeastern Conference; ACC = Atlantic Coast Conference; Pac-12 = Pacific-12

Measures

Team Identification
International students' perceived team identification toward their college sports team was measured using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale-Revised (SSIS-R; James et al., 2019). This revised scale was modified from the original 7-item SSIS (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) that assessed team identification with a given team. James et al. (2019) added a self-report screening question with a Yes/No response option and modified some anchor wording (i.e., various scale labeling) from the 8-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (low identification) to 8 (high identification). If participants answered "No" to the screening question, then the rest of the 7 items were not displayed, and the scale score was recorded as zero. A higher overall total score indicated a higher level of team identification. According to James and colleagues (2019), the SSIS-R has reasonable reliability

(coefficient alpha =.96) and validity (TLI =.99, CFI =.99; RMSEA =.06, and SRMR =.01). In this study, items were modified to ask participants' perceived identification toward their college sports teams. An example item is "How important to you is it that your college sports team wins?" The SSIS and SSIS-R have been widely utilized in previous studies that analyzed the causal relationship between one's sports team identification and consumer behaviors (Havard et al., 2020; Koo et al., 2015).

Sense of Community

The Sense of Community Scale (SCI; Davidson & Cotter, 1986) was utilized to measure international students' perception of their sense of community. The original scale had 17 items and was developed to measure the public's sense of community to a local city on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). Examples of items include "I like the neighborhood in which I live," "I feel safe here," and "The people in this city are polite and well-mannered." A higher overall score reflected a greater sense of community. Davidson and Cotter (1986) reported that the alpha coefficients were.85 and.81 for two different cities. This scale has been utilized in previous studies that sought to determine how sports participation affects immigrants' sense of community (Warner & Dixon, 2013; Warner et al., 2012).

Social Capital

As recommended by Clopton and Finch (2010), five items were adapted from the Social Capital Assessment Tool (SCAT; Krishna & Shrader, 1999) to measure international students' perceived social capital in their campus community. Under the latent construct of a two-factor model, two items reflected social trust, and three items revealed the norm of reciprocity on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Does not apply to me at all) to 7 (Completely applies to me). Higher scores indicated more social trust and/or higher strength in the relevant norms. Examples of items include "Most students/faculty at this university are basically honest and can be trusted" and "Most students/faculty at this university are willing to help if you need it." According to Clopton and Finch (2010), the coefficient alpha was.72 for social trust and.71 for the norm of reciprocity. Various studies have utilized this scale to find how one's sports fan behavior contributes to forming social capital (Clopton, 2007; Clopton & Bourke, 2011; Clopton & Finch, 2010).

Analysis

Following preliminary descriptive analysis, correlations were conducted to evaluate relationships between the variables of interest in the current study. Then, path analysis was performed to examine the hypothesized model (see Figure 1), which investigated whether team identification affects social capital directly and through the sense of community. All data management and descriptive statistics were performed using SPSS 25. For the path modeling, Mplus 8.5 with the maximum likelihood estimation was used.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations
Descriptive statistics were first computed among the variables used in this study. Means, standard deviations (S.D.), correlations, and utilized variables are shown in Table 2. The measures of kurtosis and skewness can be used to evaluate whether variables meet the normality assumption (Kline, 2015). The results indicated that all variables were in acceptable ranges (Blanca, Arnau, et al., 2013; skewness: -2 to +2 and kurtosis: -2 to +7).

Table 2 : Descriptive Statistics (N = 487)

	Measure	M (SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1	Team Identification	2.50 (2.56)	.398	-1.335	-		
2	Sense of Community	2.81 (.35)	-.208	-.086	.22**	-	-
3	Social Capital	4.77 (.70)	.037	.371	.17**	.27**	-

* = p <. 05, ** = p <.01

Table 3 : Standardized Path Coefficients

| Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Team Identification->Sense of Community	.22**	–	.22**
Team Identification->Social Capital	.11*	.05**	.16**
Sense of Community-> Social Capital	.25**	–	.25**

* p <. 05, ** p <.01

Path Analysis
Path analysis was used to examine the associations between international students' team identification and social capital through their sense of community. The composite scores from three measures were computed separately and then applied to the model. The results indicated that team identification not only had a

direct effect but also had an indirect effect through students' sense of community on international students' social capital. The estimated path coefficients (see Figure 2) were all statistically significant. Specifically, an indirect effect of team identification on social capital showed that the degree of perceived social capital significantly increased more through their positive perception of a sense of community (see Table 3). In addition, approximately 5% of the variance of the sense of community can be accounted for by students' team identification, and 9% of the variance of social capital can be accounted for by the overall model.

Figure 2 : International Students' Social Support Path Model.
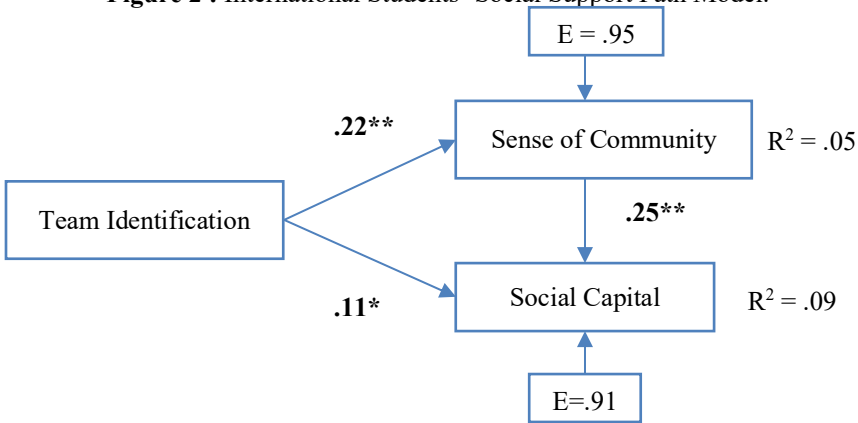
Note. Bold indicates statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

Sense of Community

While many studies have analyzed the effect of college sports team identification on the sense of community among domestic college students (Clopton, 2008, 2009; Heere & Katz, 2014; Katz & Heere, 2016, Katz et al., 2017; Smith, 1988; Sung et al., 2015; Toma, 1998, 2003), the results from the present study indicated that international students also benefit from their team identification and sense of belonging. Such results are significant, as Warner and Dixon (2013) emphasized considering various sports contexts when analyzing the sense of community.

The present study found that the effect of international students' college sports team identification accounted for a small effect size ($R2 =.05$) in regard to their sense of community. The participants' composite team identification score showed an average of 2.5 out of 7. Thus, the participants in the present study did not identify themselves much with their college sports team. Moreover, when decomposing the team identification scale more specifically, it was discovered that 44% of the participants answered that they do not have an interest in college sports. Thus, perhaps such findings are in line with previous works (Katz & Heere,

2016; Koo et al., 2015) in that a positive interaction experience must initiate the sense of community through team identification. This present study does leave room for optimism. Although nearly half of the sample reported being uninterested in intercollegiate athletics, the data showed a statistically significant causal relationship between the participants' team identification and sense of community.

Social Capital

The results from the present study seemed to be in line with previous research that found how college sports can act as a social anchor and promote fans' social capital (Clopton 2008, 2012; Clopton and Finch, 2001; Heere & James, 2007; Katz and Clopton, 2014; Stensland et al., 2019). Additionally, in lieu of the Sung et al. (2015) study that found a mediating effect of students' sense of community between their team identification and academic outcome, the authors were also able to find the mediating effect of international students' sense of community between their college sports team identification and social capital. Hence, our study found that when international students identify themselves as fans of college sports teams, they were able to create social capital directly and develop their social capital indirectly through a sense of campus community.

Moreover, considering that social capital is strengthened through shared sport fan identities, the results of the present study indicated that the current college sport spectating culture enhanced international students' social capital (both bonding and bridging). As the intercollegiate sport model is unique to the U.S., international students are most likely unfamiliar with the integration of athletics and higher education. In essence, being a college sports fan is likely a new experience for international students. In other words, compared to domestic students (who are familiar with the culture of college sports), international students are 'outsiders' in an established community where members already enjoy their bonding social capital. According to our results, although international students may be 'outsiders' of the college sports fan community, their social capital is developed directly by being college sports fans as well as indirectly from a perceived sense of community through being college sports fans. Hence, it can be derived from our results that intercollegiate sports have the possibility to serve both as bonding (from the direct causal relationship between team identification and social capital) and bridging social capital (from the mediating effect of sense of community between team identification and social capital) for international students.

Implications

This study demonstrated the need for effective strategies to serve international students studying in the U.S., as this population is essentially a group of untapped college sports consumers. Additionally, perhaps this population can even serve as a brand extension for intercollegiate sports. Thus, athletic departments should strive to attract international students through marketing initiatives. International

student offices should also note the results of the present study, as perhaps intercollegiate sports can help this population receive social support in new environments. Hence, the authors suggest that athletic departments and international student offices focus on developing strategies to utilize college sports to promote this population's social capital, which naturally can develop one's sense of community concurrently. More specifically, in accordance with social capital being specified as both bonding and bridging capital, this study strives to provide practical implications in two ways: focusing on developing international students' bonding capital that can promote their sense of community and bridging capital that can attract international students to become new fans of college sports.

Athletic departments and international student offices should work collectively to promote bonding capital among international students. According to the NCAA's (2021) report, more than 20,000 international student athletes are enrolled at NCAA-affiliated colleges. In addition, there were approximately 600 current and former international student athletes who competed in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. By grouping international student-athletes and nonstudent-athlete international students who share the same country of origin, nonstudent-athlete international students can grow interested in the college sport that their international student-athlete peers play. Moreover, by getting to know international student athletes from different countries and attending their games with other nonstudent athlete international students, the group of international student college sports fans and athletes is more likely to grow immensely and develop firm bonding with each other.

Putnam (2000) emphasized the importance of bridging social capital by promoting members' connection from the outside community. Therefore, related offices should focus on utilizing college sports to connect the two communities – the existing local fan community that has a strong bond with each other and the relatively new or nonexisting fan communities of international students who are relatively new to the college sports culture. For instance, many international student offices recruit domestic students as mentors for international students during the orientation period to assist international students in transitioning to campus. In this process, some international students may be invited by their domestic student mentors to go to their college sports events. Athletic departments and international student offices can help this group of domestic student mentors and international students to constantly attend college sports events. By constantly attending sporting events, their mentor-mentee relationship is expected to be maintained, and domestic students can further invite their domestic friends to watch the game with an international student mentee. Constant visits to college sports events can potentially lead international students to be part of the already formed social group, which is how college sports can promote domestic and international students' bridging social capital.

Limitations and Future Research

As this is a foundational study that utilized international students' college sports spectatorship and social support, this study is not free from limitations. First, this

study utilized international students enrolled in NCAA Division I Power 5 conference institutions. Since higher education institutions affiliated with Power 5 conferences spend a significant budget on their college sports programs, the environmental difference that international students experience between Power 5 and non-Power 5 affiliated colleges will be significantly different. Future studies should include international students enrolled at institutions outside of Power 5 (e.g., Group of Five, Division II, Division III).

Next, international students' team identification was analyzed by asking whether participants are fans of their college sports team in general. Again, environments are significantly different among high profile sports (e.g., football, men's basketball) and Olympic sports; thus, future studies should consider specifying this question to determine which sporting events may promote international students' team identification and social support. By determining which sport is the most effective, both athletic departments and the international student office can cooperate to utilize specific sports events to promote international student-related events.

The methods of this study also posed limitations. Because the survey was in English, some participants may have had a difficult time comprehending the questions being asked. Additionally, each scale utilized a different Likert-type scale. This may cause participants confusion and fatigue and result in fewer completed surveys.

This study also allows future studies to create a more sophisticated model utilizing various theories and concepts in sports management and education academia. For instance, intergroup contact theory, first developed by Allport (1954) and later refined by Pettigrew (1998), can be utilized to analyze whether identifying with college sports teams leads to intergroup contact. In addition, future studies should also consider analyzing whether intergroup contact leads to building bridging social capital.

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and intercollegiate sports events were held with limited capacities. Recently, arrived international students may not have experienced the environment that intercollegiate sports events with full capacity bring to campuses. Future studies should consider comparing the team identification effect during and after the pandemic on international students' social support.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies have shown that domestic students can use team identification to assist in their social adjustment to college environments. As such, the present study aimed to analyze how international students, who often experience additional difficulties acclimating to campus climates, can also use college sports team identification to promote their source of social support. More specifically, this study analyzed the causal relationship among international students' team identification, sense of community, and social capital. The data demonstrated that international students' perceived sense of community and social capital is developed through their college sports team identification. Moreover,

international students' perceived sense of community was shown to have a mediating effect between international students' team identification and social capital. In an effort to create a more positive college experience by promoting a sense of community, international student offices and athletic departments should utilize intercollegiate sports to support international students as a way to assist them in adapting to campus life. As an added bonus, collegiate sports teams would gain some new (international) fans.

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