



Sport Activity and Cultural Integration of International Students in University Putra Malaysia

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Abstract: *The aim of the study is to examine sport participation as a vehicle for cultural integration of international students at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). A total of 199 subjects were selected for the study. The Sport and Cultural Identity Scale (SCIS) developed by Allen (2010) was used to collect data. The instrument consists of 20 items measuring cultural maintenance and adaptation to multicultural environment through sport. Even though the results show that sport participation among international students in UPM does not affect either their cultural maintenance or adaptation to a multicultural environment, the mean score for cultural adaptation is higher than the mean score for cultural maintenance which suggests that the subjects perceived opportunities for adapting to a multicultural environment through sport were more important than for the cultural maintenance through sport.*

Keywords: *cultural adaptation, cultural maintenance, sport participation, international students*

Introduction

Sport has been one of the key tools to bring people together and also has been recognized as an important socialization tool. The value of sociology to the study of sport, culture and society is primarily that it provides multitudes of different ways of thinking about the human world. Various authors have defined sport over the years and generally their ideas point to specific characteristics (Coakley, 2004; Leonard, 1980; Sage, 1998; VanderZwaag and Sheehan, 1978). They explained that sport can be thought of as a specialized or higher order of play; or as games with a certain special characteristic with a physical component which is the most

critical characteristic in sport, competitiveness which will decide the winner or loser; institutionalized games that are governed and enforced by rules; and that sport almost always requires specialized facilities and equipment.

The concept of culture is complex and is used in different ways because it touches on so many aspects of life and many previous researchers has concluded that there are many different definition and meaning of culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003) and even in terms of the barriers of culture (Torbiörn, 1982). In general culture can be described as the activities or behaviors



that refer to the heritage or tradition of a group, describing rules and norms that governs that group, the learning or problem solving capabilities of the group,

One of the attractions to sport is to develop an identity that belongs to that specific group of people or to create our own identity (Bradley 1999; Chuan, Yusuf & Shah, 2013). In an increasingly impersonal world, sport may help different groups of people answer question like: Who am I? Who else is like me? Whom can I trust? In specific discussion of sport and Irish identity, while of sport, nationalisms and identities written by Reid and Jarvie (2000) have argued that sport helps different ethnic groups or nationalities develop a sense of cultural identity. Kim, 2001, explained that longer-term contact with a foreign culture, the insights made into that culture and the involved process of adaptation lead to changes in the individual. The process also included learning through communications. Berry et al. (2002) also understand adaptation as a process that eventually results in an outcome.

Among one of the strategic plans of the Malaysian national higher education is to establish Malaysia as an international hub for higher education excellence. International students began studying in Malaysian colleges and universities in 1996 (Morshidi, 2008). In Universiti Putra Malaysia, there are currently 3787 international students studying mostly at the graduate level (Master and PhD). The former Minister of Higher Education of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled, pointed out the lack of empirical studies to examine the needs of the international students, specifically on sport activity. Participation in sport among college

it defines the organization as a group, or refers to the origins of the group (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen, 1992).

students are low and that international students are significantly among the non-participants in campus extracurricular activities. The participation of international students in sport might open more opportunity for them to socialize with local students and learn more of the local culture. There are currently very few research on this topic and these studies have been limited to frequency of participation (Omar-Fauzee et. al., 2009; Lee, 2005; Li & Stodolska, 2006; Yoh et al., 2008), comparing international students with local students involvement in physical activity (Hashim, 2012) and international students campus recreational sports participation (Gou & Ross, 2014).

The purpose of the study is to examine the international students' cultural identity in terms of cultural maintenance and cultural through sport participation. Specifically, this study addresses the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: What is the degree of international students' cultural maintenance through sport participation?

RQ2: What is the degree of international students' cultural adaptation in a multicultural environment through sport participation?

Methodology

Participants of this study were 199 international students (141 males and 58 females) selected using convenient sampling. Age of the subjects ranged from 25 to 61 years (mean age = 31.11 years; standard deviation = 7.05). In terms of nationality, most of the subjects were



from Africa (n=87, 44%) followed by the Middle East (n=81, 41%). The Sport and Cultural Identity Scale (SCIS) by (Allen et al. 2010) was used as the instrument. The instrument consists of 20 items measuring cultural maintenance through sport and adaptation to a multicultural environment through sport. In addition, subjects were also asked about their

Result

The main purpose of this study is to examine international students' cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation in a multicultural environment. The answers to RQ1: "What is the degree of international students' cultural maintenance through sport participation?" can be seen in Table 1. Table 1 shows that the item from cultural maintenance questionnaire which has the highest mean of 3.79 is the statement 'Sport allows me to meet others of the same nationality', followed by the item 'Sport provides me opportunities to socialize with others with the same cultural identity' (m=3.71). The results suggest majority of the subjects (71.80%) participate in a sport activity where the participants are other students from their country. Additionally for 69.9% of the subjects, sport participation is an opportunity for them to socialize with students from their country that share the same cultural identity.

The answers to RQ2: "What is the degree of international students' cultural adaptation in a multicultural environment through sport participation?" are presented in Table 2. It was found that the item with the highest mean is the item 'Sport provides me with opportunities of socialize with others from a different culture' with a mean score of 3.95, followed by 'I have met friends on campus of different

favourite sport activity, frequency of sport participation in a week and whether they participated in a local sport activity different from those in their country. Results of the pilot study showed that internal consistency of the instrument ranges from 0.80 to 0.89 and were deemed acceptable.

nationalities through participating in sport' (m=3.89). It is interesting to note that the range of mean scores for cultural adaptation is much higher (3.52- 3.95) compared with items measuring cultural maintenance factors (3.04- 3.79). The results seem to suggest that even though international students prefer to participate in sports with students from the same country (Table 2, m=3.79) rather than students from other countries (Table 3, m=3.68) for cultural maintenance purposes, but there are also opportunities for them to socialize and meet students from other countries from a different culture through sport activities in UPM.



Table 1: Cultural Maintenance through Sport

Item	Mean	SD	SD	D	U	A	SA
Sport allows me to meet others of the same nationality	3.79	0.97	5	19	32	98	45
Sport provides me opportunities to socialize with others the same cultural identity	3.71	1.01	9	17	34	101	38
I have met friends on campus that have the same cultural background as my own through sport	3.6	1.05	8	26	39	90	36
Participating in campus sport allows me to network with people from the same cultural background	3.58	1.06	8	26	46	80	39
I have socialized on campus with individuals who share my cultural values and experiences through sport	3.5	1.15	14	28	38	82	37
Sport allows me to express my cultural identity	3.4	0.98	10	24	60	86	19
Sport participation connects me with my cultural background	3.33	1.04	9	36	56	75	23
I usually participate in sports that are traditionally popular in my country	3.32	1.21	17	39	40	69	34
I participate in sport in order to enrich my cultural identity	3.22	1.18	18	38	53	61	29
I participate sport in UPM primarily with individual who share my cultural values and experiences	3.04	1.29	30	46	33	65	25
			15.10%	23.10%	16.60%	32.70%	12.60%



Table 2. Cultural Adaptation to a Multicultural Environment through Sport

Item	Mean	SD	SD	D	U	A	SA
Sport provides me with opportunities to socialize with others from a different culture	3.95	0.91	2 1.00%	15 7.50%	30 15.10%	95 47.70%	57 28.60%
I have met friends on campus of different nationalities through participating in sport	3.89	1.01	5 2.50%	18 9%	30 15.10%	85 42.70%	61 30.70%
Sport allows me to network with individual from diverse cultural backgrounds on campus	3.84	0.93	4 2%	13 6.50%	40 20.10%	94 47.20%	48 24.10%
Participating in sport makes me feel like I am apart of the larger campus community	3.81	0.93	4 2%	14 7%	42 21.10%	94 47.20%	45 22.60%
Sport allows me to gain acceptance from others in my new environment	3.8	0.95	4 2%	17 8.50%	39 19.60%	93 46.70%	46 23.10%
Through sport, I have socialized with individual from different cultures on campus	3.77	1.03	6 3%	19 9.50%	39 19.60%	84 42.20%	51 25.60%
Sport participation allows me to become more connected to my new cultural environment	3.74	0.97	4 2%	20 10.10%	41 20.60%	91 45.70%	43 21.60%
I usually participate sport in UPM with individuals of a different cultural background	3.68	1.06	8 4.00%	22 11.10%	39 19.60%	86 43.20%	44 22.10%
Participating in sport allows me to enter in to a new cultural environment	3.66	1	7 3.50%	21 10.60%	38 19.10%	98 49.20%	35 17.60%
Sport provides me with an opportunity to adapt to the Malaysian cultural environment	3.52	1.09	11 5.50%	24 12.10%	50 25.10%	77 38.70%	37 18.60%



Discussion

One characteristic of being an international student is living in a foreign national culture. Hence, international students and their adaptation or integration might be influenced by the respective host culture. Moving from one academic environment to another and relocating to a new country to study is becoming an increasingly common occurrence. International students who decide to pursue studies in a foreign country have to overcome the challenges that are related to their adjustment experiences. They are required to deal with the differences between their own cultural values, norms and customs and those of their hosts. International students are expected to deal with highly challenging academic demands exactly the same as the local students, but they face totally new linguistic barrier and environment, and thus often feelings of insufficiency and insecurity in their language skills.

In this study, international students are not able to participate in a new sport activity different from those in their country. Cultural barriers in the form of communication problems might have prevented international students in participating and learning local sports such as sepak takraw and silat. International students might have had communication problems with others, which could explain why learning new culture was the least preferred reason for sport participation in this study. Consistent with Yusof & Shah (2007), Hashim (2012), Omar-Fauzee et al., (2009) and Tan (2008) studies that explained that barriers and constraints such as language barriers, lack of friends, lack of information about existing sport activities and facilities, inconvenient

facility location and inconvenient facility operating hours could lead to a lack of interest for international students in trying a new kind of sports. Hashim (2012) reported that "International students' non-participation in campus activities, such as sports, is often due to perceived, rather than actual barriers they are confronting".

Taleboo and Basri (2015) reported that international housing complex was not conveniently situated in UPM for international students to freely participate in sport. The location of the complex is very isolated. This might be the reason why international students in this study are not interested to participate in a new type of sport such as local traditional sport like sepak takraw, perhaps because the location of facilities to play local sports is not conveniently situated near their housing complex. Accommodation for international students should be much closer to the facilities and the authorities should consider allowing more international students to stay in the UPM colleges where there are more opportunities for sport participation. According to Yusoff & Celliah (2010), socio-cultural adjustment by international students in a foreign country such as Malaysia requires both social and language skills. Due to communication problems, Taleboo and Basri (2015) also indicated that all international students had communication problems with others, which could explain why learning new culture was the least preferred reason for sport participation in this study.

The mean score in this current study for cultural adaptation is higher than the mean score for cultural maintenance. This outcome supported findings by Allen et al. (2010) which



suggests that opportunities for adapting to a multicultural environment through sport were more important than for the cultural maintenance through sport. Even though international students are not participating in a local sport, the results suggest sport activities in UPM provide international students opportunities to socialize with others from a different culture. By socializing with locals through sports, international students may utilize sport to embrace certain elements of Malaysian culture, thus facilitating their adaptation in the new multicultural environment. Participating in sport with local students might contribute to certain behaviour that can provide international students with multicultural interactions, exposure to Malaysia culture, and acceptance from their peers. Embracing their new multicultural environment through sport-participation may strengthen the connection between international students and the larger campus community.

Conclusion & Suggestions

Yusoff & Chelliah (2010) had clearly suggested that, the transition to a higher learning institution life, as with most life transitions, could be a stressful period in which many changes are taking place. Explaining the variance in successful adjustment to a higher learning institution is important, and there are many factors to consider. Understanding the experiences of international students has important implications for creating and implementing programs that provide academic and personal support. International students need to make huge adjustment during their stay in foreign countries. The adjustment will not only contribute to students' academic

performances and life functions, but also to students' general wellbeing (Hashim, 2012). Although a variety of strategies can be applied, it has been suggested that activities that promote greater social interactions like sport may be effective in helping the students in their adjustment process. Luzzo and Henao (1996) conducted a qualitative study on international Students examining their academic and social needs. The research revealed that participants of the study believe that participation in campus sport activities is an essential component towards forming social networks. Thus, UPM needs to promote international student awareness about Malaysian culture and sport. UPM International Students Association should work more closely with the UPM Sport Centre and residence colleges and organize activities such as Malaysian Sport and Art festival, Traditional sports day and others. Through such activities, international students obtain the benefits of meeting new friends to maintain a home culture or understanding different cultures making the process of adaptation to multicultural environment easier for international students.

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