

## Original Research

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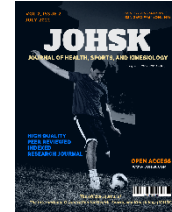
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# Understanding Korean Immigrants and Major League Baseball Fandom

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## Introduction

Currently, there are more than 40 million immigrants in the United States, and immigrant sports consumers have been considered a significant niche market in the sport industry. In particular, Major League Baseball (MLB) teams have realized that Korean immigrants, along with Japanese immigrants, are among the most attractive Asian immigrant MLB markets in the U.S., because of their large populations in the U.S. and the popularity of baseball in their native countries (Kim & Jeon, 2008). However, there has been limited research regarding Asian immigrants' team identification with MLB teams.

The theoretical framework of this study is drawn from acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982). Berry defines acculturation as "the general processes and outcomes (both cultural and psychological) of intercultural contact" (Berry, p. 8). Acculturation theory has been widely used to explain the adaptation patterns of immigrants to a new society. This theory further explains not only how immigrants evolve in new cultural contexts resulting from migration, but also how they retain their original cultural contexts and beliefs while in their new society (Berry, 1997). According to Berry (1980), there are four types of acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. These four acculturation strategies differ according to immigrants' efforts to adapt to new cultural contexts as well as the extent of their relationships with their new as well as with their old societies.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) is a useful theoretical framework for team identification. Social identity is defined as "the part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (p.2)". Team identification research has been developed based on social identity theory and identity theory (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007). Team identification is an extension of self-identity that results from a sports fan's psychological connection to a team (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002).

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the Major League Baseball fandom of Korean immigrants by exploring factors associated with recent Korean immigrants' team identification with MLB teams in the U.S.

## Methods

A qualitative design, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, was employed to explore factors associated with first-generation Korean immigrants' team identification with MLB teams. The interview questions address significant aspects of the immigrants' sport experiences and the meaning of team identification with MLB teams that have Korean players. The snowballing sampling method was implemented to recruit the research participants. Korean immigrants who lived in the U.S. more than five years and three years in Atlanta and came to the U.S. as first-generation Korean immigrants were considered potential research participants at the beginning stage of the data collection.

The authors conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with both male and female Korean immigrants in Atlanta, Georgia. After the interviews were completed, the process of data analysis was initiated. Although the conceptual framework was a guideline for identifying areas of interest in the interview data, the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerged from the data; they were not imposed on the data prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990). Open coding was utilized to categorize the participants' responses into several themes. Through the open coding process, initial codes were assigned and "the first attempt to condense the mass of data into categories" was made (Neuman, 2000, p. 421). Each participant's interview responses were analyzed and placed into a category.

## Results

The findings of this qualitative study revealed the following five factors, which elaborate and explain essential perspectives in understanding team identification of Korean immigrants with MLB teams in the U.S.; (a) adaptation patterns; (b) baseball involvement levels before migration to the U.S. (c) the presence of a Korean player (d) team standing, and (e) satisfaction with immigrant life.

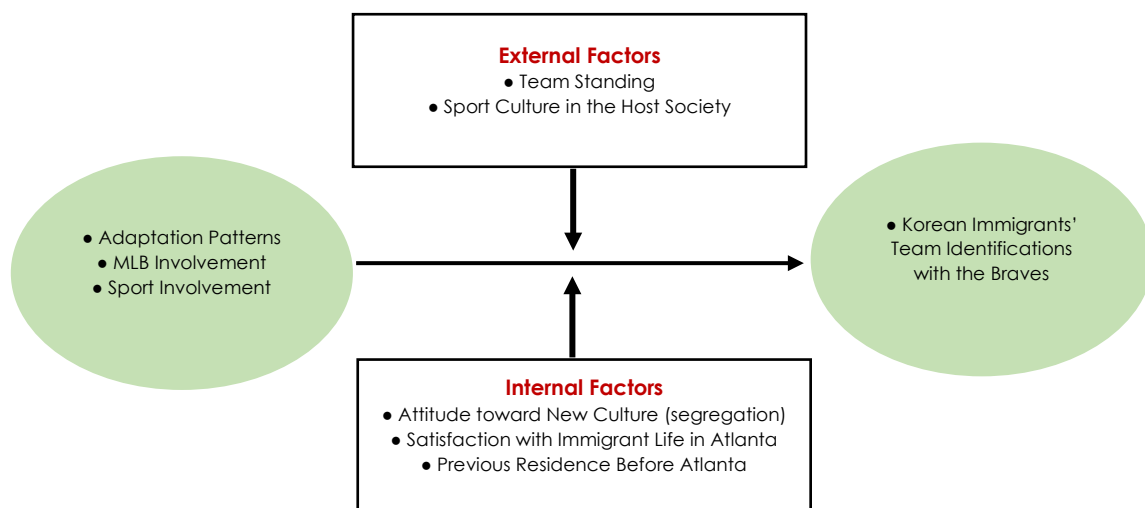


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Korean Immigrants' MLB Fandom

## Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative research revealed crucial factors researchers need to consider gaining a better understanding of immigrant' sport experiences. These factors are the immigrants' previous residence, satisfaction with current residence, the status of sport culture in the host society, the team's standing, and satisfaction with immigrant life. In other words, understanding the context surrounding immigrants' lives in the host society is essential to accurate interpretation of their sport experiences as an ethnic minority. The attitude of Korean immigrants toward accepting their new culture, their satisfaction with immigrant life in the Atlanta area, and their previous residence should be considered when understanding their team identification. In short, the holistic understanding of Korean immigrants' lives is necessary for a better comprehension of the MLB fandom of Korean immigrants.

## Discussion

This research shows that, regardless of adaptation patterns, the presence of Korean players in MLB games was the factor that appealed most to Korean immigrants and encouraged them to watch MLB games. Previous studies have shown that vicarious achievement was the most significant motive for team identification (Fink et al., 2002). Vicarious achievement, defined as the feeling Korean immigrants have when watching MLB games in which Korean players participate, was shown to be the main reason they watch MLB games. Vicarious achievement can be interpreted to mean that the presence of Korean players in the U.S. was a means to retain their ethnic identity through supporting Korean players. Also, the presence of Korean players seems to be a means of providing important glue for the Korean immigrant community, fandom to MLB teams, as well as the host society. The limitations in this study should be considered a guideline for future studies. For a deeper understanding of Korean immigrant sport consumer behaviors, future studies should explore the following three aspects: (a) second-generation Korean immigrants, (b) existence of Koreatown in the city vs. non-Koreatown, and (c) other American professional sports.

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