

Flag football participants in Mexico and NFL consumption

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This study explored flag football participants in Mexico as potential consumers of games and merchandise of the National Football League (NFL). An online questionnaire was administered through a flag football organization in Mexico. Using K-mean cluster, participants were grouped into four categories based on a combined score of identification with flag football and American football: ‘avid flag football participants’, ‘dedicated football participants’, ‘avid American football participants’, and ‘casual participants’. MANOVA tests were conducted to see whether there is a main effect for different clusters in terms of current and future consumption of NFL games and merchandise. Gender differences were also examined. Different clusters showed different levels of consumption, which was seemingly influenced by their identification with American football. Females showed higher levels of flag football identification than males while males had higher identification with American football than females. Male participants were prominent consumers of both NFL media and merchandise.

Keywords: American football, flag football, identification, sport consumer behavior, adoption and diffusion theory

INTRODUCTION

While few countries have professional leagues of American football, the popularity of the sport continues to rise worldwide. National Football League (NFL) games are currently watched in more than 100 countries and 2014 Super Bowl XLVIII was broadcasted to 198 countries in more than 25 languages (Price, 2014; Sandomir, 2014). The rise in exhibition and regular season games abroad is an example of NFL expansion overseas.

NFL initiatives to expand globally are not new. In the past, these initiatives have included: the first exhibition game played outside North America in Tokyo in 1976; the American Bowl Series, played overseas between 1986 and 2005; the creation of the World League of American Football in 1989;

NFL Europe in 1998; NFL Europa in 2006; and the NFL International Series since 2007 (Hoffman, 2012). Despite these efforts and interest in American football, the growth outside of the USA has been much slower when compared to the global expansion experienced by other sports such as basketball and baseball (Marvez, 2014). Even though the NFL has been ranked as the most successful sport league in the world (Ejiochi, 2014), some critics argue that it will soon reach a saturation point (Belson, 2014). As a result, expanding to new territories and branding the league to international markets seems like a logical step for the NFL.

Expanding the NFL’s global appeal requires not only implementing strategies aiming to increase the number of viewers

who watch NFL games but also providing opportunities for local people to learn and play the sport at a recreational and amateur level. While many of the NFLs current strategies focus on expanding television viewership, recently, more attention has been given to develop the sport at the participant level (Breer, 2012; El Universal, 2013; Show, 2009). However, the complexity of the rules, the costs of the equipment, and the perceived risk associated with its practice all appear to deter efforts to expand the sport to a wider range of participants. One way to vanquish these challenges is by introducing future participants of American football to an adapted form of the sport: *flag football*.

The diffusion and adoption of any sport at a global scale is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by a single factor. Scholars who have studied the globalization and spread of sports across the world have used mostly anthropological, historical, and sociological paradigms (see Guttman, 1993; Maguire, 2015) with less attention given to examine these processes through the lens of consumer behavior models. In this study, Roger's (2003) adoption and diffusion theory and Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory are used as umbrella theories to inform the adoption and consumption of NFL products (games and merchandise) among flag football participants in Mexico. Rogers' theory seems particularly suitable for this study as it provides the theoretical foundations that follow the adoption and diffusion of new products in a given population. Meanwhile, Tajfel's social identity theory provides us the theoretical foundation played by identification during sport consumption.

Although American football is not new in Mexico, over the years its practice has been limited mostly to a handful of colleges and universities. It was not until the late 1920s when American football began to be played in a more organized way (Orellana, 2006). In fact, during the 1950s, American football became one of the preferred

sporting attractions among educated, middle- and upper-class Mexicans. In 2012, NFL Mexico estimated that 27 million Mexicans followed the league, of which 6.4 million were considered avid fans, positioning Mexico as the largest NFL fan base outside of the USA (NFL Mexico Visits, 2012). But despite the popularity as a spectator sport, the existing leagues of American football in Mexico are limited, let alone there is no professional league in the country yet.

The current state and popularity of American football in Mexico makes this country the perfect context to examine the adoption of a sport, although showing great popularity among fans, still offers limited opportunities for its people to participate. Flag football serves as the natural path to learn not only the fundamentals of American football (i.e. strategy) but also serves as the platform to socialize children and young participants with American football. As noted by consumer socialization theorists, individuals' attitudes and behavior are constantly shaped and reinforced throughout their lifespan, suggesting that early socialization to a product might induce future consumption of a similar product (Moschis, 1987).

The idea that flag football can serve as a stepping stone for American football has been generally accepted, particularly within the NFL. In 2000, the NFL launched in Mexico 'NFL Tochito', a flag football tournament developed with the aim to create brand awareness within the younger Mexican audience. NFL Tochito was also a response to the rising popularity of flag football in Mexico. Today, this noncontact modality form of American football is played all over Mexico by boys, girls, and adults of both genders. Developing the interest for American football throughout a gateway grassroots sport like flag football, seems like the natural path to cultivate a critical mass of future NFL fans in Mexico. Therefore, examining the extent of the efficacy of flag football as a strategy to

develop fans and future consumers of the NFL seems not only critical to advance scholarship, but also contributes to inform managerial practices aiming to take the NFL globally.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored flag football participants as potential consumers of games and merchandise of the NFL. Drawing from studies in the sport consumer behavior literature (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee, & Mahony, 2008; Trail, Robinson, Gillentine, & Dick, 2003) participants of flag football in Mexico were segmented based on their self-identification levels with flag football and American football, and their current and future consumption of NFL products were examined. In addition, the effects of participants' gender on their consumption were examined as previous studies (Fink et al., 2002; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2002) have suggested that gender plays a critical role in sport consumer behavior. Since this was an exploratory study, research questions were generated rather than hypotheses.

The following section discusses the background and theoretical framework that underpins this study. First, a discussion of the tenants of Roger's innovation and adoption theory is presented, followed by a discussion of the role of social identity theory and consumer identification in sport, the role of gender in sport consumption, and a description of the differences and similarities between American football and flag football. The manuscript continues with a description of the methods, results, discussion, and ends with the limitations and ideas for future research.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Innovation, Adoption, and Diffusion

How innovations become adopted in new markets has received significant attention

from scholars and practitioners from an array of disciplines including organizational development, management, healthcare, distance language learning and teaching, and information technology (Lundblad, 2003). Much of the advancements in this area have been influenced by the theory of diffusion of innovation developed by Everett Rogers in the early 1960s.

Rogers' theory of diffusion of innovation rests on four elements: *innovation*, *communication*, *time*, and the *social system*. Rogers (2003) defines innovation as an 'idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption' (p. 12).

According to Rogers, an innovation does not necessarily mean that the product to be adopted is 'objectively new', but instead it is perceived new by the target population. In the context of this study, despite the popularity American football and the NFL have in Mexico, we treat these two as innovations.

According to Rogers (2003), for an innovation to be adopted five conditions will affect the speed of this adoption, including: the *Relative Advantage* of the innovation, this is how much benefit the innovation brings when compared with the benefit offered by the old product; *Compatibility*, how compatible are the values transmitted by the innovation with the values of those who will adopt the innovation; *Complexity*, which is how easy or difficult the innovation is compared to the existing product; *Trialability*, which is the possibility offered by the innovation to be tried and tested before a consumer commits to its adoption; and finally is *Observability*, which is how observable is the innovation to potential adopters.

The second element in Rogers' theory is *communication* which refers to the means by which the innovation is channeled to consumers. The third element is represented by *time*, which refers to factors that influence responsiveness to an innovation. It involves the innovation-decision process, type of

adopters (e.g. innovators, early adopters, early majority, and laggards), and the speed by which the innovation will be adopted by a group of consumers. Finally is the *social system*, which is made by all of the stakeholders (e.g. opinion leaders, change agents, etc.) who have a stake in the process of adopting an innovation (Lundblad, 2003).

While adopting an innovation is influenced by a myriad of factors, scholars have noted that the capacity for an individual to adopt an innovation, or *consumer innovativeness*, is significantly influenced by individual factors. Steenkamp, Hofstede, and Wedel (1999) defines consumer innovativeness as the 'predisposition to buy new and different products and brands rather than remain with previous choices and consumption patterns' (p. 56). Therefore, consumer innovativeness is not only influenced by individual differences such as personal values, demographics (e.g. level of education, age, income), and consumer-context specific dispositions (e.g. consumer ethnocentrism and attitudes toward the past), but also through national cultural dimensions such as: individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity (see Hofstede, 1991). According to de Mooij (2011), the adoption of innovations become a 'culture-specific phenomenon' (de Mooij, 2011, p. 353). Therefore, and because of culture influence consumer innovativeness, an innovation will show different speeds and degrees of adoption in different cultural contexts. In addition to the role played by culture, scholars have noted that the adoption of innovations is also influenced by the type of product. Thus, the 'adoption of one new product reinforces adoption of others in the same category' (de Mooij, 2011, p. 351).

Considering that many innovations will never become adopted by consumers, the need to understand how American football and the NFL progress and become adopted

into the Mexican market offers a great opportunity to examine this phenomenon from the lenses of the theory of diffusion of innovation. In this study, we do not test empirically how the NFL is adopted, but instead we use Roger's theory of diffusion of innovation to give some preliminary thoughts of the adoption of American football and the NFL in Mexico through the practice of flag football. Failing attempts by the NFL to globalize American football, particularly in Europe, provides the rationale that the problem in question must be examined from an array of perspectives, one of these perspectives is the theory of diffusion of innovation.

Identification

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), individuals look to identify with groups that share similar values to them. This association enhances a person's self-esteem. Individuals also look to associate with people or organizations that display features they aspire to have (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Similarly, in the context of consumer behavior, individuals look to be associated with brands, products, or companies they value (Marin, Ruiz, & Rubio, 2009). The role of identification in consumer behavior is so critical that some scholars have suggested that 'what we buy, own, and consume define us to others as well as to ourselves' (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012, p. 406).

In the sport literature, Trail, Anderson, and Fink (2000) define identification as 'orientation of the self in regard to other objects including a person or group that results in feelings or sentiments of close attachment' (pp. 165–166). Scholars who have studied the role of identification in sport consumer behavior suggest that this construct plays an important role in individuals' cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions (Capella, 2002; Wann &

Branscomb, 1993). Cognitively, highly identified fans might perceive their team's performance more favorably (Dietz-Ihler & Murrell, 1999). Affectively, highly identified fans are more likely to experience high levels of anxiety and emotion when their team plays (Wann, Schrader, & Adamson, 1998). For example, an individual who is highly identified with flag football would be more emotionally invested in the game's result. Finally, identification also influences behavior. Stryker and Serpe (1994) found that identity salience is one of the factors explaining time spent in various behaviors. Applied to the sport context, individuals with high identification might attend more games and spend more money to follow their identified team (Wann, 2006; Zhang, Won, & Pastore, 2005). As noted by Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2014), 'identification can thus be considered one of the most important drivers of fan retention' (pp. 21–22). Furthermore, it was found that levels of identification also influence media and merchandise consumption behaviors (Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore, 2002; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

An important aspect in consumer identification theory is that the subjects of identification vary because people identify with multiple points such as a player, coach, university, level of sport, or the sport itself (Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Robinson & Trail, 2005). Considering that one of the premises of this study is that flag football and American football relate to each other, flag football and American football were used as attachment points to categorize participants' identification levels. Thus, identification with flag football was used because subjects in this study were participants of flag football. Furthermore, identification with American football was used because its simile with flag football and because this is the sport that is played in the NFL. Considering that the purpose of this study was to explore flag football participants as potential

consumers of games and merchandise of the NFL, it seems reasonable to test the extent identification with each of these two sports inform consumption for NFL products. As noted by de Mooij (2012), the adoption of one category of products will influence the adoption of other products in the same domain. Considering the similarities that exist between flag football and American football, it is reasonable to suggest that these two fall within the same domain. By examining the degrees of identification individuals have toward these two sports, it is expected that participants classified by their identification levels (low and high) will show different patterns of current and future media and merchandise consumption of the NFL games and products.

The Role of Gender

Using demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and age for segmentation of spectators is widely used due to its convenience to obtain information (Zapalac, Zhang, & Pease, 2010). Several studies (e.g. Fink et al., 2002; McCabe, 2008) in sport consumer behavior have used gender as a variable, but the effect from gender is not conclusive. Some studies (e.g. Fink et al., 2002) have found that there are differences in spectator motivation by gender. Studies conducted by Dietz-Uhler, Harick, End, and Jacquemotte (2000) and Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) suggest that males attend sporting events because they play sports and want to obtain more information, whereas females attend sporting events more for a social reason. In addition to motivation, gender was a factor for satisfaction with the sporting venue (Trail et al., 2002). In particular, Trail et al. (2002) found that different aspects of venue such as cleanliness, parking, and concessions are more or less important depending on spectators' gender.

On the other hand, other studies have showed that there is no meaningful difference by gender. James (2002) found no gender difference in motives to attend sport events. McCabe (2008) also found that spectators' gender was not a contributing factor in attitude toward women's professional leagues. Acknowledging that there are no conclusive effects by gender, this study will examine whether the participants' gender plays a role on current and future NFL media and merchandise consumption.

American Football and Flag Football

This study suggests that individuals who play flag football will have an interest in American football. This thesis is based on the similarities that exist between these two sports, such as, the overall goal of the game, the type of football used, and the ways points are scored. Yet, there are differences that distinguish one sport from the other. Two of the main differences between American football and flag football are (1) the way offensive players are tackled and (2) the type of equipment used by players.

One of American football's distinctive feature is the way a defensive player tackles a ball carrier to prevent the advancement of yards towards the end zone. A tackle involves body contact which forces the ball carrier to the ground. In contrast, in flag football, a tackle does not involve body contact because a tackle means 'deflagging' (take off a flag) the ball carrier of the flag that he/she wears around the waist which is attached to a belt.

In American football, players are required to wear (to protect their bodies) a helmet, pads on their shoulders, and pads on their knees. Meanwhile, in flag football players are only required to wear a belt with two or three flags hanging on the side. Considering that flag football does not require any expensive or elaborated type of equipment, it provides an affordable choice for

participants who not only want to play this sport but also have the opportunity to experience a taste for American football.

Other differences between American football and flag football are the number of players that play. American football requires 11 participants in each team, flag football allows a variable number of players in each team, from a minimum of 4 to up to 11 players in each team. Finally, participation in flag football tournaments allows single-gender teams and coed teams playing against each other. American football teams usually compete in one single-gender category (International Federation of American Football, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The previous sections led us to pose the following four research questions:

RQ1: Would participants grouped by football identification level (American football and flag football) show differences in their current consumption of NFL products (media and merchandise)?

RQ2: Would participants grouped by football identification level (American football and flag football) show differences in their future consumption of NFL products (media and merchandise)?

RQ3: Would participants' gender make a difference in their current consumption of NFL products (media and merchandise)?

RQ4: Would participants' gender make a difference in their future consumption of NFL products (media and merchandise)?

METHODS

Instrument Development

The questionnaire includes four sections which examine (a) participants' identification with flag football and American football, (b) their current and future consumption of NFL media, (c) their

current and future consumption of NFL merchandise, and (d) socio-demographic information and other related questions (see [Appendix](#)).

The first section of the questionnaire measures the participants' identification levels with two sports (flag football and American football) using the 'sport' dimension of Point of Attachment Index (PAI) developed by Trail et al. (2003). The 'sport' dimension was revised with 'flag football' and 'American football' respectively resulting in six items. Questions were asked with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7).

The second section asks about current and future consumption of NFL media and merchandise. To measure merchandise consumption, three questions were adapted and revised from Fink et al.'s (2002) study. For the current merchandise consumption, three items of 'I buy NFL clothing', 'I wear NFL apparel on a regular basis', and 'I buy NFL-related merchandise' were used. To measure current media consumption, three items from Kim et al. (2008) study were adapted and modified: 'I track the news on the NFL through the media', 'I watch or listen to NFL games through the media', and 'I read articles on the NFL in newspapers, magazine, or on the internet' were used. To measure future consumption of media and merchandise, these items were revised to reflect the respondent's intention for future consumption. Lastly, socio-demographic questions were asked including gender, age, education, marital status, and experience of American football.

A panel of experts examined the initial questionnaire to check its construct and content validity. These experts were composed of four sport management faculty and four industry professionals with knowledge in sport consumer behavior, American football, and flag football. Based on their feedback, minor wording changes were made.

The survey was initially developed in English and then translated into Spanish by a college professor whose native language is Spanish. Then, the Spanish version was translated back to English by a graduate student who is fluent in both languages to ensure the accuracy of the initial translation. Lastly, these two versions were sent to the World Language Department to verify the accuracy of the translation. A certificate of translation was obtained and submitted to get the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Participants and Procedure

In this study, flag football participants in Mexico were examined in their current and future consumption of NFL's media and merchandise consumption. Prior to the data collection, IRB approval was obtained. A sport organization that organizes flag football tournaments in Mexico, FLAGTEX, agreed to serve as a web platform to promote this study for the participants of flag football tournaments. Therefore, a short announcement, which included the purpose of the study and an invitation directing flag football participants to the survey were posted on their website with an online survey link.

To obtain enough number of participants, the announcement was posted on the FLAGTEX website for two months prior to the National Tournament organized by the FLAGTEX. By the end of the 2-month period, a total of 491 usable surveys were collected after deleting 35 incomplete surveys. Of the 491 participants, 59.9% ($n = 294$) were male and 33.8% ($n = 166$) were female with 6.3% ($n = 31$) no response. The mean age of participants was 26.56 (SD = 7.56) years old and the participants' average monthly household income was 9500 Mexican pesos (equivalent to US\$650 or 530 Euros). In terms of education, 178 participants were college students (36.3%), 146

had bachelor's degree (29.7%), 75 had a high school degree (15.3%), 63 had a graduate degree (12.8%), and 12 participants had not completed high school ($n = 12$, 2.4%). The majority of respondents were single ($n = 347$, 70.7%), while 77 people were married (15.7%) and 35 were cohabiting (7.1%). A total of 208 participants (42.4%) indicated that they had no experience with American football while 238 (48.5%) indicated that they either played or were playing American football with 45 (9.21%) with no answer.

Analytical Procedure

Using K-means cluster analysis with the Euclidean distance approach in which each observation is assigned to the cluster having the nearest mean (MacQueen, 1967), the respondents were grouped into four clusters using combined scores of FFI and AFI. A matrix of four participant clusters is shown in Figure 1. This matrix consists of two dimensions: identification with flag football and identification with American football.

Next, multivariate of analyses (MANOVA) were conducted to test the influence of the clusters of flag football participants on (a) current consumption of NFL products (media and merchandise) and (b) future consumption of the NFL products (media and merchandise). Lastly, to test for gender difference, MANOVA were performed with

gender on (a) current consumption of NFL and (b) future consumption of the NFL.

RESULTS

Cluster Analysis with Sport Identification

All constructs met the minimum required level of 0.70 for reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994): sport identification: 6 items (identification with flag football: $\alpha = 0.89$; identification with American football: $\alpha = 0.94$); and sport consumption: 12 items (current merchandise: $\alpha = 0.89$; current media: $\alpha = 0.92$; future merchandise: $\alpha = 0.94$; future media: $\alpha = 0.94$).

To test the first two research questions, the participants were classified into four groups using K-mean cluster based on the participant's identification score, a combined scores of identification with flag football (FFI) and American football (AFI). A cluster with high FFI with moderate identification with American football (FFI = 5.73, AFI = 4.49; $n = 93$) was named as 'avid flag football'. A cluster with high levels of flag football and American football (FFI = 6.55, AFI = 6.66; $n = 266$) was named as 'dedicated football' cluster. The third cluster, 'avid American football' have moderate FFI with high AFI (FFI = 4.03, AFI = 6.59; $n = 83$). Lastly, the 'casual participant' cluster was the smallest cluster with low flag football and low AFI (FFI = 3.15, AFI = 2.81; $n = 34$) (see Figure 1). Overall, the average of participants' identification was relatively high for both flag football ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.32$) and American football ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.36$). ANOVA tests confirmed these are four distinctive groups ($F(3,483) = 453.59$, $p < .001$ for FFI; $F(3,475) = 571.91$, $p < .001$ for AFI).

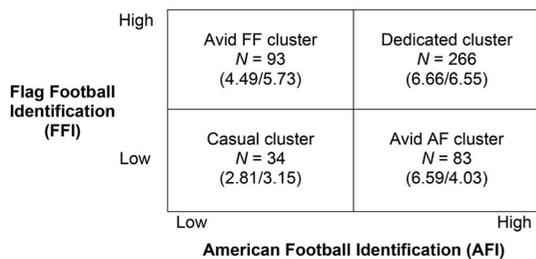


Fig. 1. Results of cluster analysis (American football, flag football)

MANOVA: Differences in Clusters

NFL current and future consumption

The result of the MANOVA revealed that there was a significant difference in current consumption levels of the NFL by clusters

(Wilk's $\lambda = 0.60$, $F(3,465) = 21.60$, $p < .01$). In terms of the current consumption, participants' media consumption level was higher ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.68$) than the merchandise consumption level ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.80$). In terms of group differences in media and merchandise consumption, 'dedicated' cluster showed the highest level in both media ($M = 5.95$) and merchandise consumption ($M = 4.29$) while 'casual' cluster marked the lowest both in media ($M = 3.15$) and merchandise ($M = 2.37$).

In terms of future consumption of NFL products, the mean score for intention for future media consumption was 5.35 ($SD = 1.70$), while the intention for future merchandise consumption was 4.82 ($SD = 1.82$). This shows that future media consumption level ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.70$) did not change when it was compared to participants' current media consumption ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.68$). However, in terms of merchandise consumption, the participants' intention to purchase NFL merchandise in the future ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.82$) was significantly higher than their current merchandise consumption level ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.80$, $t(476) = 14.01$, $p < .001$). For both current and future media and merchandise consumption, four groups showed distinct levels of consumption in the order of dedicated, avid American football, avid flag football and casual cluster from the highest to lowest (see Table 1).

Differences by Gender

Among 166 female participants, only 33 (19.9%) participants answered that they have some experience with American football, while 127 (76.5%) answered that they have no experience with American football. This is quite contrasting to the response of male participants. The majority of male participants did have some experience with American football ($n = 205$, 69.7%), while only 81 (27.6%) participants have no experience. This aspect was also well reflected on

participants' identification levels with each sport. In terms of FFI, the female participants' mean score ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.26$) was higher than that of male participants ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.33$, $F(1,455) = 6.19$, $p < .05$). In regard to American football, however, male respondents' mean score ($M = 6.22$, $SD = 1.22$) was significantly higher than the female counterpart ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.45$, $F(1,449) = 38.34$, $p < .01$) (see Table 2).

The results of MANOVA showed that males showed significantly higher levels of consumption ($F(1,437) = 9.92$, $p < .01$) in current media and merchandise and future media consumption of NFL products: the biggest difference was in the current media consumption (male = 5.62, female = 4.70, $F(1,437) = 31.16$, $p < .01$). However, there was no significant difference in the future merchandise consumption between male and female (male = 4.88, female = 4.62, $F(1,437) = 2.00$, $p > .05$). Both genders showed increased levels of media and merchandise consumption in the future compared to the current consumption levels. Overall, participants' media consumption levels were higher than those of merchandise consumption (see Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Result Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of flag football participants in Mexico as consumers of the NFL in terms of media and merchandise. The main premise of the study is that flag football participants in Mexico could be potentially a good target market for the NFL due to the similarity between flag football and American football. Considering the unique characteristics and benefits flag football offers to participants (i.e. its similarity to American football but with easy rules, coed and all age participation, and inexpensive), it is deemed that flag football might be a cost

Table 1. MANOVA for current consumption and future consumption

	Groups by sport identification					Univariate	
	All	Avid AF	Dedicated	Avid FF	Casual	<i>F</i> (3,465)	Sig.
<i>N</i>	491	83	266	93	34		
Current media	5.33	5.89	5.95	3.87	3.15	88.77	< .01
Current merchandise	3.85	4.00	4.29	2.98	2.37	22.58	< .01
Future media	5.35	5.69	5.92	4.33	2.95	60.79	< .01
Future merchandise	4.82	4.98	5.37	3.86	2.84	36.02	< .01

*By cluster: Wilk's $\lambda = 0.60$, $F = 21.60$, $p < .01$.

effective grassroots strategy to not only extend the participant base to American football but also, perhaps, to turn these participants into NFL fans. Acknowledging that there are still differences between American football and flag football, this study examined the participants' identification levels with these two sports and whether the different clusters grouped by their identification show different patterns of current and future consumption of NFL media and merchandise.

To segment flag football participants into unique groups, their sport identification score, a combined score of identification with flag football (FFI) and American football (AFI), was used. K-mean cluster analysis grouped the participants into four categories. This classification revealed that 266 (55.88%) out of 476 respondents who indicated their identification level were in the 'dedicated' cluster, which is characterized by high

identification with flag football as well as American football. In addition, another 17.43% ($n = 83$) participants have high identification levels with American football. This alludes that many flag football participants have high interests in American football, which makes them a very good target market for NFL products.

First and second MANOVA were conducted to see whether there is a main effect for the individuals in different clusters in terms of current and future consumption of the NFL in terms of media and merchandise. While the participants' current NFL merchandise consumption level was rather modest ($M = 3.85$) compared to the media consumption ($M = 5.33$), different clusters showed different levels of consumption, which was seemingly influenced by their identification level of American football. Therefore, groups of 'dedicated football' and 'avid American football', whose group members

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for gender

	All <i>N</i> = 491	Female <i>N</i> = 166	Male <i>N</i> = 294
Experience with American football	Yes: <i>N</i> = 238 No: <i>N</i> = 208	Yes: <i>N</i> = 33 (19.9%) No: <i>N</i> = 127 (76.5%)	Yes: <i>N</i> = 205 (69.7%) No: <i>N</i> = 81 (27.6%)
Identification with flag football	$M = 5.78$ (SD = 1.31)	$M = 5.98$ (SD = 1.26)	$M = 5.66$ (SD = 1.33)
Identification with American football	$M = 5.93$ (SD = 1.37)	$M = 5.43$ (SD = 1.45)	$M = 6.22$ (SD = 1.22)

Table 3. Mean scores for current and future NFL consumption by gender.

	Gender		Univariate	
	Female	Male	F(1,437)	Sig.
	166	294		
Current media	4.70	5.62	31.16	< .01
Current merchandise	3.48	4.02	9.31	< .01
Future media	4.93	5.54	13.56	< .01
Future merchandise	4.62	4.88	2.00	> .05

have higher identification with the American football, showed higher levels of media (dedicated $M = 5.95$; avid American football; $M = 5.89$) and merchandise (dedicated $M = 4.29$; avid American football; $M = 4.00$) consumption than 'avid flag football' ($M = 3.87$ and $M = 2.98$ respectively) and 'casual' groups ($M = 3.15$ and $M = 2.37$ respectively).

When comparing current and future media consumption, there was no overall change (current = 5.33, future = 5.35). The 'avid flag football' cluster, however, showed a significantly higher level of future media consumption (current = 3.87, future = 4.33, $t(91) = 4.04$, $p < .001$). This not only signals a good potential of this group as the consumers of the NFL, but also suggests the possibility of flag football participants to become developed into American football consumers. In other words, although this group's current identification level with American football is moderate ($M = 4.49$), considering the similarity of the sport, this cluster looks promising in developing their interest in American football in the future. Overall, the majority of the respondents have an interest in American football attested by some of the descriptive statistic results: Vast majority of the respondents (88.80%, $n = 436$) watched the previous year's Super Bowl and the majority (72.30%, $n = 355$) of participants are following a specific NFL team. This provides an evidence for potential of these flag football participants as the consumers of the NFL.

Compared to current merchandise consumption ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.80$), future merchandise consumption ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.82$) was significantly higher. This might suggest that the participants are willing to purchase more merchandise when they have more disposable income: NFL merchandise becomes more affordable as their financial situation improves, given that the participants are relatively young ($M = 26.56$) and many ($n = 178$) are still college students. However, licensed NFL merchandise might still be expensive for the average Mexican in general. Although GDP per capita in Mexico has continually increased (\$10,307 in 2013), it is still only about one-fifth of the USA (\$53,041 in 2013) according to the World Bank's (2016) data. About half of the respondents in this study reported an average monthly household income of 5901–19,400 Mexican pesos (approximately US\$404–1325). Therefore, buying a licensed NFL jersey or even subscribing to the NFL Network, which costs about 1500 Mexican pesos or US\$102.7 each, could be very prohibitive price for a non-essential item. Considering the participants showed relatively high levels of media consumption (current = 5.33, future = 5.35), the interest is already there, but the high price tag of NFL merchandise might make it less accessible to people. The NFL should consider merchandise prices reflecting the living expenses in different countries, and also expanding contracts with over-the-air

networks like Televisa and Televisión Azteca to include more programming of NFL games.

In the second part of the study, participants were classified by gender to determine if it is a factor in their NFL consumption habits, as several studies (e.g. Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; Wann et al., 2001) evidenced that gender is an influencing factor on many attitudinal and behavioral aspects. About one third (33.81%, $n = 166$) of the total participants ($n = 491$) were female in this study. Compared to their male counterpart, females ($M = 5.98$) showed a higher level of FFI than males ($M = 5.66$), while males ($M = 6.22$) had higher identification with American football than females ($M = 5.43$). Considering that 68.9% ($n = 188$) of the male participants either played or are playing American football, while only 20.1% ($n = 33$) of the female participants have experience in American football, this high identification with American football is somewhat given.

In terms of current consumption of the NFL, male participants were more prominent consumers of both media (male = 5.62, female = 4.70) and merchandise (male = 4.02, female = 3.48). While female respondents' intended future media consumption ($M = 4.93$) still lagged behind that of males ($M = 5.54$), female respondents showed the same level of future merchandise consumption as male respondents (male = 4.88, female = 4.62, $F(1,452) = 1.80$, $p > .05$). This result suggests that the female fans might be as important as the male fans in the NFL merchandise market in the future. This is on the same line with the recent increased sales of NFL merchandise sold to women: the 2011 playoff season showed an 85% sales increase in December over 2010, after its launching of 'Fit for You', a clothing line specifically made for women in 2010 (Dosh, 2012). This showcases the NFL's effort to strengthening the relationship with women as they realize that

women become more important for their business.

General Discussion

The main justification for exploring this plausible relationship is the need to explore the efficacy of the grassroots strategy. Over the last decade, the NFL has implemented flag football tournaments overseas as a way to broaden the market for American football. Mexico, with no professional American football league, is a unique market for the NFL due to the popularity of both flag football and American football. Mexico has been regarded as one of the primary international markets for the NFL's expansion, along with the UK, Canada, China, and Japan (Breer, 2011). This is partly due to Mexico's geographical proximity to the USA but also due to the growing population of NFL followers in Mexico (NFL Mexico Visits, 2012). Despite this favorable context, the NFL faces some challenges before it reaches a sustainable fan base in that country.

This study examines the potential of flag football participants in Mexico as the consumers of NFL products. Therefore, it examined the transferability of the respondents' 'participation' in flag football to 'viewership' or 'fanship' of the NFL. In other words, can 'participants' of flag football, a similar sport to American football, be good potential followers of the NFL? When addressing this question, there is a need to look into the relationship between participants and fans. What is the likelihood a participant becomes a fan? Casper and Menefee (2010) identified experience in the sport as one of the main antecedents of sport consumption. Their study showed that individuals who played soccer viewed more soccer games compared to non-soccer participants. Furthermore, studies conducted by Octagon (2009a, 2009b) found that the most avid golf and tennis spectators are the ones who

play the respective games. This might indicate that if an individual understands and knows about the game through participation, the same individual is more likely to watch that sport. Although flag football and American football are not exactly the same, flag football could provide an excellent way to lower the barrier to participate, and induce participants' interest in American football. Just like miniature golf is not same as golf, but it can serve as a way to introduce individuals to the game of golf and induce their interests in golf.

Direct participation (i.e. playing), however, is not the only way an individual gets interested in the sport. Watching sport can also trigger interests. For a sport with complex rules such as American football, learning its rules would certainly help individuals understand the sport, which can further build the fan base. Many sport organizations, including the NFL, pays attention to this aspect. In the early 2000s, the NFL started 'football 101' especially for targeting females by educating them on the rules of the game (Crepeau, 2014). This strategy can be especially effective for a sport like football, since women have traditionally limited opportunities to participate.

Overall, the interest in American football and geographical proximity makes Mexico a good potential market for the NFL although there are still some economic barriers to make this country a prime market. While these numbers have improved, the NFL can continuously develop more grassroots initiatives like NFL Tocho and conduct longitudinal research to further investigate to what extent these types of grassroots initiatives work. When developing strategies to create a fan base, the NFL could benchmark some of the initiatives implemented by Major League Soccer (MLS) in the USA. Show (2009) discussed how MLS teams have built soccer fields in the surrounding areas of their stadiums so that these can be used

by youth soccer organizations. The idea behind this strategy is to not only offer a space for the practice of recreational soccer, but also to develop a space where grassroots sport organizations meet with professional sport teams. This strategy offers children the opportunity to learn, practice, and have fun with soccer, and to gain insight into the MLS. In the context of flag football in Mexico, the NFL could implement a similar strategy aimed to connect 'recreation' and 'competition' by organizing or sponsoring flag football tournaments on the same fields or university campuses where most American football leagues play.

Diffusion of Innovation and NFL Adoption in Mexico

Elements of Roger's theory of diffusion of innovation can be conceptually applied to this study. A main argument of this study is that participation in flag football can serve as a mechanism to socialize fans into American football and to the NFL. According to de Mooij (2011), the adoption of an innovation in one category of products reinforces the adoption of similar products within the same category.

Following the five conditions of an innovation listed by Rogers (2003), it is possible to argue that at least three of these conditions, *complexity*, *trialability*, and *observability* might halt and lessen the adoption of the NFL in Mexico. The complexity of American football rules, the absence of opportunities for people to play American football in Mexico, and the limited NFL programming available through over-the-air television networks could all contribute to slow the rate and speed of its adoption. Assuming this premise is correct, then, it is possible to argue that flag football rises as a good strategy to curve some of these challenges, by contributing to develop the interest for American football and the NFL.

When examining the adoption of American football and the NFL in a country like Mexico, it is undeniable that elements of this theory such as the channel of communication that facilitates the knowledge of the adoption, the rate or time of adoption, and the social systems involved in the adoption of the innovation are all present. In regards to channels of communication, Lundblad (2003) noted that these play an important role in bringing the gap between the innovation and the adopter. In Mexico, media and TV programming have played an important role in expanding the mass of NFL followers for the sport. While some NFL programming is available through over-the-air television networks like Televisa and Televisión Azteca, the majority of the games are still broadcasted through subscription and cable networks (Luhnow, 2014). Therefore, and despite the availability of televised NFL games to the Mexican audience, the limited size of the pay TV market along with a sport television programming dominated by soccer still makes the NFL efforts a real challenge to broaden the base of its followers. Therefore, promoting the practice of flag football with initiatives such as NFL Tocho can be a viable strategy to trigger and draw the attention and interest for American football, a first step in the process to become an NFL fan in the future.

In terms of *time*, the third element of the diffusion of innovation, perceived knowledge of the innovation plays an important role in the speed of adoption. Therefore, future NFL adopters might also be influenced by their capacity to understand the game of American football. Considering that the rules of American football are complex, the strategy to socialize future adopters through flag football seems not only reasonable but also viable. This effort will contribute not only to enhance the existing knowledge of the rules but perhaps contribute to teach the basic elements of the sport to those who do not have any knowledge at all.

Finally, the scope of adoption of an innovation it also depends on the influence exerted by the broad *social system* represented by the opinion of leaders and other agents of change. The role of expatriate players who play in a foreign league has been acknowledged to have an important effect in popularizing that league in the expatriate's home country (Larmer, 2005). While several foreign players were signed for the 2015 NFL season, no Mexicans were among the international draftees. Considering the role as league ambassador these foreign players have, it is reasonable to sustain that by drafting future Mexican players into the NFL would contribute to advance the rate of adoption of the NFL Mexico. Evidently, attempting to achieve this goal through the channels of flag football participation could result in a very long-term strategy. Currently, the absence of opportunities to play and participate in competitive American football makes this goal extremely difficult for Mexicans to aspire to play in the NFL.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY AND IDEAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study aimed to investigate flag football participants in Mexico as a potential market for American football, especially for the NFL. To find out whether there are different patterns of consumption of NFL products, the participants were grouped by their identification level with the two sports and by gender. Although the results showed that there are distinct differences in consumption levels by these different groups, the comparison was limited to flag football participants. In the future study, sampling general population including flag football participants would help us to understand the influence of playing flag football has on the consumption of American football. In addition, it was assumed that the similarity between flag football and American football would make the flag football participants

into the prime consumers or potential consumers of the NFL, but the causal relationship between the two sports was not investigated. In other words, this study did not answer the question whether flag football participation triggered the interest in American football and the NFL or the participants' interest in American football leads them to play flag football. In the future study, this question would help better understand of the relationship between the two sports.

Although this study utilizes Rogers' theory of innovation of diffusion to conceptualize the adoption of American football and the NFL through the practice of flag football, the effect of the factors addressed in this theory were not tested empirically. Future studies should use empirical methods (e.g. Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory) to test some of the elements of Rogers' theory outlined in this study. Similarly, future studies should also consider examining the degree of consumer innovativeness of both flag football participants and non-participants. Considering that consumer innovativeness is influenced by cultural as well as individual factors (Benedict, Steenkamp, Hofstede, & Wedel, 1999), it is important to take some of the brainwork regarding Rogers' theory discussed in this study with caution. Because flag football and American football are very popular in Mexico, more empirical research is needed to capture the nuances of this plausible relationship between these two sports. More empirical research is also needed to understand not only the nature of consumer innovativeness of Mexicans but also on the overall impact the theory of diffusion of innovation plays in the adoption of the NFL.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Survey items

Survey items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Identification with flag football	5.78	1.32	.89
First of foremost, I consider myself a fan of flag football.			
I am a huge fan of flag football in general.			
I love to follow the game of flag football.			
Identification with American football	5.98	1.36	.94
First of foremost, I consider myself a fan of American football.			
I am a huge fan of American football in general.			
I love to follow the game of American football.			
Current consumption of NFL merchandise	3.85	1.80	.89
I buy NFL clothing (e.g. Jersey, T-shirts, sweatshirts, gloves, etc.).			
I wear NFL apparel on a regular basis.			
I buy NFL-related merchandise (e.g. mug, key chain, watch, etc.)			
Current consumption of NFL media	5.33	1.68	.92
I track the news on the NFL through the media (e.g. TV, Internet, radio, etc.).			
I watch or listen to NFL game(s) through the media (e.g. TV, Internet, radio, etc.).			
I read articles on NFL on newspapers, magazine, or Internet.			
Future consumption of NFL merchandise	4.82	1.82	.94
I am likely to purchase NFL's licensed merchandise in the future.			
In the future, purchasing NFL's licensed merchandise is something I plan to do.			
In the future, I intend to purchase NFL's licensed merchandise.			
Future consumption of NFL Media	5.35	1.70	.94
I intend to track the news on the NFL through the media (e.g. TV, Internet) in the future.			
In the future, watching or listening to NFL game(s) is something I plan to do.			
In the future, I am likely to read articles on NFL on newspapers, magazine, or Internet.			
Other socio-demographic questions			
Gender:			
Age			
Marital status			
Income: Which of the following best represent your monthly family income? (currency = Mexican pesos)			
(a) less than one minimum wage (\$1900)			
(b) \$1901–3900			
(c) \$3901–5900			
(d) \$5901–9700			
(e) \$9701–19,400			
(f) \$19,401–38,900			
(g) \$38,901 and higher			
Other American football-related questions			
Did you watch the last Super Bowl:	Yes	/	No
Do you follow any specific NFL team:	Yes (which team?)	/	No
Do you have any experience in playing American football?	Yes	/	No

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