Psychological Connection to Pickleball: Assessing Motives and Participation in Older Adults

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Sport participation is promoted to older people as a means to maintain their health and well-being (Henderson, Casper, Dern, & Wilson, 2012). In a 20-year longitudinal study examining older adults, those who played sports, compared to those participating in exercise activities, were more likely to continue physical activity in older years (Aggio et. al., 2017). Given that the surge in retiring baby boomers may lead to a significant increase in the number of older adults participating in sport (Gard & Dionigi, 2016), sport opportunities popular with older adults, such as the growing sport of pickleball, are worth examining.

The growth in pickleball is promising from a public health perspective, as the sport provides a platform for meeting physical activity guidelines (Smith, Denning, Zargrodnik, & Ruden, 2016), creating new social connections (Chen, 2017), and providing unique hedonic experiences connected to psychosocial well-being (Heo, Yang, Kim, & Rhee, 2017). Commitment to a physical activity is positively correlated with continued participation (Alexandris, Funk, & Pritchard, 2011; Heere & Dickson, 2008). This study looked at psychological commitment using the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM; Funk, 2009). The PCM examines an individual's movement from a low to a high psychological connection related to a specific sport activity. Additionally, the PCM provides distinct value by identifying significant differences in the degree of behavioral involvement and allows for a more nuanced interpretation of motivation.

To date, there has been very little academic research on pickleball. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine psychological connection to the sport of pickleball by investigating active older adults (55 years and older) in relation to behavioral involvement and motives for participation.

Data was collected using an online survey of a representative sample of active pickleball players in North Carolina (N = 690). The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM: Funk, 2008) categorized players into four distinct connection levels of Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance. Participants on each PCM level were analyzed based on playing length, play frequency, and motivations for participation (Competition, Diversion, Fitness, Skill Mastery, and Socialization). A chi-square independence test examined the relationship between the identified PCM levels and the participation length. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) identified any significant differences among the PCM levels based on participation frequency per month. Last, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to identify significant differences in motivation constructs based on the PCM levels.

Different degrees of behavioral involvement were found among the four levels. The chi-square test revealed that there was a significant (p < .05) relationship between the PCM levels and participation length. The longer one played pickleball, the more likely they were to report higher psychological connection to the game. There were exceptions. For example, those who had been playing for two or more years represented 40% of participants coded in the Awareness level.

The ANOVA test examining differences among the four PCM levels based on participation frequency (i.e., the number of plays per month) found that participation frequency was significantly different among the four PCM levels. Post Hoc results revealed that 1) there was no difference between Awareness and Attraction levels, 2) Awareness and Attraction means were significantly lower than Attachment and Allegiance, and 3) Attachment level means were significantly lower than Allegiance level.

MANOVA findings revealed that there were significant differences in the motivation factors based on the four PCM levels. Partial eta square identified Competition (.13) and Skill Mastery (.16) significantly higher for respondents at the highest PCM levels.
The results highlight the importance of psychological connection, as it is associated with playing more often. Those at the Allegiance level played almost twice as often as those at the Awareness level. Assuming that play length is at least 30 minutes, those whose connection to pickleball is at the Attachment or Allegiance level are most likely meeting or exceeding recommendations for older adults of at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week (US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2017).

Additionally, motives that related to skill mastery and competition were significant characteristics of the highest connection levels, providing a clearer understanding of what differentiates and relates most closely to those who have made a higher commitment to the sport. This finding also provides evidence that pickleball facilities that offer programming for improvement and competitive opportunities (such as league play) will help better psychologically connect future and current participants and help with retention of those highly connected to the game.