Psychological Commitment to Pickleball: An Examination Based on Age and Competitive Involvement

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The purpose of this study was to examine the determinants of psychological commitment to pickleball, the fastest growing senior sport in the United States (Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2018). With 10,000 Baby Boomers hitting retirement age each day between now and 2030 (US Census, 2018), sport service providers targeting seniors need to critically examine the needs and wants of this community. Unique to the baby boomer generation is competitive sport participation, as a vast majority have played competitive sport in their youth and continued to play over their adult lifespan (Cochrane et al., 2009).

This study used a modified version of the Sport Commitment Model (SCM: Casper & Jeon, 2017; Scanlan et al., 2016) to understand the determinants of commitment to pickleball participation and to compare determinants based on age (older adults versus seniors) and competitive involvement (recreational versus league/tournament play). Past research examining sport participation and commitment have found that as the age of a participant increases, competition becomes less important while determinants such as having enjoyment, involvement opportunities, and improving fitness are more salient (e.g., Brodkin & Weiss; 1990; Alexandris et al., 2002; Casper et al, 2007). While all sports are inherently competitive, older adults and seniors who play competitively may have different reasons for their commitment (e.g., Dionigi et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2019). Therefore, this study hypothesized that the determinants of sport commitment would: (1) significantly differ based on age, and (2) significantly differ based on competitive involvement.

An online survey, approved by a human subject review board, was sent by USA Pickleball Association Ambassadors to an estimated 2,500 valid emails of pickleball players in a southeastern US state; 817 surveys were completed (~32% response rate). Model constructs (Competition, Commitment, Desire to Excel, Enjoyment, Fitness, Other Priorities, Personal Investments, Social Constraints, Social Support, and Valuable Opportunities) were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis based on factor loadings (> .50), composite reliability (> .70), and average variance extracted (> .70) (Garson, 2013). Structural equation modeling examined all constructs as determinants of Commitment (dependent variable); statistical differences (p < .025) were examined based on age (older adult 45–64 years, n=315; senior 65+ years, n=454) and competitive participation (recreation, n=524; competitive, n=293).

Results found that Enjoyment was the greatest significant predictor explaining the variance of Commitment, while Personal Investments was a non-significant predictor in all comparisons. With age comparisons, Competition, Desire to Excel, Other Priorities, and Valuable Opportunities were equally significant for both older adults and seniors. Fitness was only significant for seniors, while Social Constraints was only significant for older adults. With competitive participation, Fitness, Other Priorities, Social Support, and Valuable Opportunities were significant for recreational players and non-significant for competitive players, while Social Constraints was significant for competitive players and not for recreational players. Competition was a significant detractor of commitment for recreational players. The findings provide unique theoretical contributions to the SCM (e.g., non-significant personal investments), while providing practical contributions toward retention of participants (e.g., competition as a detractor) to be discussed in detail at the presentation.