

Sport commitment among older amateur athletes: a study of the 2011 National Senior Games

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Abstract keywords

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Aim of abstract/paper - research question

Active participation in exercise, physical activity, and sport is encouraged throughout the world due mainly to the quality of life benefits to be gained. Nevertheless, much of the world's population does not exercise nearly enough, if at all, especially older age groups. As societies age throughout the world (the proportion of those over 60 will increase from 11% in 2009 to 22% by 2050 worldwide (United Nations)), the need to increase involvement in physical activity is greater than ever.

One segment of the ageing population that does participate regularly in exercise is older amateur athletes, or 'senior athletes'. Senior athletes' participation in competitive sport is a growing phenomenon supported by an increasing range of organized competitions to choose from. Many senior athletes prepare year-round to maintain or improve their mobility, endurance, skills and performance in their sport(s). As a result, senior athletes are a particularly interesting group to study. Improved understanding of what drives these seniors to participate in sport will enhance efforts to involve a larger percentage of the ageing population in both sport and exercise.

The purpose of this research is to advance our understanding of senior athletes by analyzing not only how and why they participate, but also why they remain committed to organized competitive sport.

Literature review

Previous research offers various perspectives on the factors affecting participation in amateur competitive sport (Casper, Gray, & Babkes-Stellino, 2007; Gill & Deeter, 1988; Kolt, Driver, & Giles, 2004; Masters, Ogles, & Jolton, 1993; Scanlan, Russell, Magyar, & Scanlan, 2009). Scanlan et al. (2009) and Casper et al. (2007) each tested the Sport Commitment Model (SCM) with amateur athletes. In addition to finding sport enjoyment to be the key factor driving commitment, both studies identified a need to continue exploring and expanding the SCM. Other studies identify different commitment motives and propose an integration of the existing concepts to advance understanding. Kolt et al. (2004) identified six participation motives among active seniors, with health and fitness emerging as the most influential. In a study of marathon runners, Masters et al. (1993) proposed four main categories of motives: psychological, achievement, social, and physical. They suggest adapting their model by combining it with variables

from related research and applying it to new demographic groups. Finally, Gill and Deeter (1988) analyzed 'sport achievement orientation' and found competitiveness to be a key driver in sport participation, suggesting that further research be done to elucidate the characteristics of their model. Despite these varied results as well as recommendations for expansion and integration, there is a lack of research attempting to combine the existing sport participation concepts in an effort to advance the sport commitment model.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

This exploratory research utilizes both theoretical and empirical methods. First, the existing conceptual work is integrated in an effort to develop a more comprehensive sport commitment model for senior athletes. Second, the modified model is tested in an online survey. Survey participants include athletes registered for the 2011 Summer National Senior Games (NSG) held during two weeks in June in Houston, Texas. The NSG competition involved nearly 10,000 athletes aged 50 and older who competed for medals in 19 different sports. A test pilot was carried out during the event with 92 athletes. After revisions were made, an online survey was emailed to 7,943 registered athletes. A hardcopy version was mailed to a random sample of 340 athletes without email accounts. A total of 2,147 surveys were returned for a response rate of 25%. Respondents were 57% male and 43% female, ranging in age from 50 to 93 ($M = 67$). Both closed- and open-ended question formats were used. Demographic information was also gathered. Cronbach alpha tests were used to estimate the internal consistency and reliability of each latent variable. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling were also utilized to test the model using IBM SPSS Amos.

Results, discussion and implications

Analysis of results and implications is still being carried out at this time. In our preliminary analysis, the estimated alphas fit within the range of .89 and .95 demonstrating consistency of the selected variables. The results of chi-square and other typical indices suggest a reasonably fitting model. The structural equation modeling supports our initial hypothesis about the variables' influence on sport commitment. Initial analysis of sport commitment predictors identified such as 'social opportunities' and 'win-orientation' suggest opportunities for expanding the model to enhance our understanding of sport commitment among older amateur athletes.

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