Older Adults’ Sport Preferences and Participation

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Introduction
The North American population is aging rapidly (United Nations, 2013), highlighting the importance of studying sport in later life. Research suggests that sport participation has been linked to positive cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes (Gayman et al., 2017). Although older adults are encouraged to participate in sport through “healthy or active aging” discourses in sport policies (Gard et al., 2017), sport programs often prioritize younger populations and downplay older adults in practice (Liechty et al., 2017). For sport professionals to meet the needs of older adults, additional research is needed. This study aimed to investigate the role of aging in older adults’ sport participation and provide strategies for better serving this population.

Theoretical Framework
This study is informed by the theory of Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC), which postulates that older people select activities strategically to accommodate age-related changes (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Furthermore, older adults may reduce involvement in activities by selecting those with the most meaning, optimize the time and effort spent in selected activities, and compensate for age-related losses through some strategies.

Methods
Participants included 1,203 (552 men, 651 women) older adults (M = 63.377; SD = 8.255). As a part of the study, participants completed an online questionnaire. Participants were provided a definition of sport and asked: “Have you participated in sports in the past year?” “Which sports have you not done but wish to try?” and “What are the reasons for your lower-than-desired level of involvement in sports?” Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and Pearson correlations. Further data analysis is still in progress.

Results and Discussion
Preliminary results indicated that approximately half of the participants (50.2%) played sports in the past year. Findings showed that age was negatively correlated with participation (r = -.112, p < .05). Specifically, sport participation significantly differed by age (X2(3) = 12.888, p = .005) with 54.8% of adults aged 50-59, 50.8% of those 60-69, and 45% of those 70-79 reporting playing sports in the past year. Three-fifths of the sample in the study expressed interest in trying a new sport. The most desired sports were golf (10%), pickleball (8%), and softball (6%). The top two reasons for lower-than-desired sport participation were “lack of people of my age with whom to participate” (40%) and “lack of friends or family with whom to participate” (39%). Other common reasons included “don’t have the required skill” (31%), and “afraid of getting hurt” (29%). Ongoing data analysis will compare differences in older adults’ sport participation and desire to try new sports among different age groups. In line with the SOC theory, our preliminary findings suggest that the sport field should increase attention to older adults because they desire to play but face constraints. Sport professionals can do this more effectively by selecting/providing sports that older adults prefer, optimizing the value of these programs by addressing issues such as lack of companions, and compensating for age-related issues such as fear of injury through rule modifications.