Psychological and Social Outcomes of Sport Participation among College Students: A Systematic Review

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College students are expected to not only endure demanding academic workloads but also develop and maintain various types of social networks. Compared to other age groups, it is argued that college students face unique life situations and challenges. To be specific, many scholars have highlighted that young adulthood is a critical period to address mental health due to a significant higher risk of having psychiatric disorders (Kessler et al., 2005), loneliness (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019) or health risk behaviors such as alcohol consumption or substance use (Stone et al., 2012) that can be resulted from detachment from family members and new transition process.

Sport participation is one dominant form of physical activity that can promote psychological and social outcomes due to its social nature (Berg et al., 2015). This significant role of sport participation on various types of health-related outcomes are well documented for children and adolescents (Eime et al., 2011a), adults (Eime et al., 2011b), older adults (Heo et al., 2018), and intercollegiate student-athletes (Storch et al., 2005). Nevertheless, relatively little literature has investigated the sole effect of sport participation on college students' social and psychological outcomes (Lower et al., 2013). Moreover, the findings are still fragmented due to the fact that the concept of “sport participation” has been used with different terms, such as serious leisure, recreation, or physical activity. Recognizing these gaps, using systematic review, we explored the psychological and social outcomes of sport participation among college students (non student-athletes) in order to identify the current research gaps and provide future directions.

This systematic review searched the seven major databases (i.e., SPORTDiscuss, Cochrane Library, PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, CINAHL). Initially, a total of 27,232 records were identified. According to the PRISMA guideline, a total of seven studies were included for the final review. All seven studies were empirical studies, including six quantitative studies and one with mixed methods. Six quantitative studies had varied sample sizes ranging from 98 to 2,164, whereas one mixed study had 76 participants. All seven studies included both male and female samples.

Of the seven studies, four publications confirmed the positive relationship between sport participation and personal psychological enhancement such as self-efficacy (Decamps et al., 2012), emotional maturity, competence, self-confidence (Mouloud et al., 2016) and quality of life (Shaikh et al., 2016; Snedden et al., 2019), Three publications found the negative relationship between sport participation and psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Decamps et al., 2012; Shaikh et al., 2016; Yazici et al., 2016). Three studies disclosed the positive relationship between sport participation and social outcomes among college students including a better ability to work with diverse group (Artinger et al., 2006), capacity for social interaction (Mouloud et al., 2016) and a higher level of perceived social benefits (Lower et al., 2013).

Theoretical and practical contributions will be discussed for generating a better understanding of organizational capacity promoting sport participation among college students and identifying strategies to enhance the effectiveness of those programs.