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The motivations to play organised club-based sport in Australia

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ABSTRACT

The way individuals want to consume sport during their leisure time has changed dramatically over past decades. In order to meet sport participant consumer needs, it is important to understand their motivations to play and how these may differ between different demographics. The aim of this study was to investigate the motivations to play sport across: age, gender, residential location and the settings, modes and level of participation. An online survey of sport participants asked about age, gender, residential location, type of sports and physical activities participated in, frequency and duration of play, and motivations for playing organised club-based sport. Survey respondents ($N = 4{,}395$) were aged between 13–92 years. The Self-Determination Theory, Fun Integration Theory, and relevant sport motivation research were used to develop the motivations for playing organised sport in the survey and the results are described and discussed based on this information. The main motivations were fun/enjoyment, physical health/fitness, performance/competition and social reasons. Motivations differed between demographic groups and across the lifespan. Sport policy makers and managers should focus on developing flexible and inclusive sporting opportunities that centre, on friendship, fun and skill development, and those diverse intrinsic motivations that better align with participants' desires to play sport.

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Introduction

The context of participation in sport globally

Globally, the context of participation in sport is largely aligned with two dominant dimensions, community-level participation and elite performance (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023; Hoye et al., 2022). However, participation in sport is governed, structured and delivered quite differently across the globe (Ibsen et al., 2022; Westerbeek & Karg, 2022). For example, in Europe the sport system has evolved essentially on a platform of amateur participation and recreation-based sport, with a focus on play and local communities at its core (Westerbeek & Karg, 2022). In some European countries, such as Germany, sports clubs have an extensive community focus, with additional initiatives relating to health promotion, social integration, youth sports development, and collaborations with other community organisations such as schools and sports clubs (Fieiler & Breuer, 2020). In contrast, the sport system in America is dominated by corporate business, media and commercial

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gain, with government and community playing only a minor role (De Jonghe, 2019; Westerbeek & Karg, 2022).

In the Australian context, the sporting system is governed by the Australian Sports Commission, which has a dual focus on community sport participation and elite performance (Department of Health, 2018). The Australian sporting system operates at a federal, state/territory and local authority and organisational level (Jeanes et al., 2019). As the overarching governing and Government body, Sport Australia sets the strategic priorities and aligned investments related to high performance and sport participation for peak sporting organisations such as National Sporting Organisations (Department of Health, 2018; Jeanes et al., 2019). These national organisations then govern the state/territory level State Sporting Associations, which then provide the connection between the national-level policies and strategies with community sports clubs (Jeanes et al., 2019). Community sports clubs in Australia are generally not-for profit organisations – volunteer-run clubs specific to one sport (R. Eime et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2018). This is similar to the sporting context in England, where sports clubs are generally for single sports, run by volunteers and governed by national sport governing bodies (Nichols & James, 2020).

In Australia, volunteers cover various roles including coach, manager and coordinator, competition officials, organisational leadership and governance (Burgess et al., 2021; R. Eime et al., 2021). The sport product offerings at these community clubs have traditionally been competitive forms of the game, including weekly training and inter-club competitions during the yearly season, with a strong focus on winning (Borge, 2021; Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023). It has been argued that these traditional models of community club-based sport participation no longer align with the dominant societal preferences for participation in leisure-time physical activity, which have changed dramatically over recent decades (Australia, 2023; Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023).

Social and policy changes in sport

The constantly changing social and policy context in which sport is produced, delivered and consumed is a driver and catalyst for sports organisations to evolve in Australia as well as other countries (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). From a sport participant consumer perspective, globally, there has been a shift away from club-based competitive models and other formally structured participation in sport towards non-competitive, individual and informal types of participation in sport and physical activity (R. Eime, 2015; Harris et al., 2017; O'Connor & Penney, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2022; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Commercial providers have responded to these changes in consumer preferences by offering more flexible, bespoke and convenient pay-as-you-go sporting, wellbeing and physical activity opportunities (Clavel San Emeterio et al., 2016). This expansion of choice for those who want to be active has also accelerated throughout COVID-19 when many sport competitions were cancelled, resulting in an uptake of individual non-competitive forms of physical activity (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2022), as well as online (Son & Berdychevsky, 2022) and home-based activities (Edwards et al., 2022).

Given the changes in participation patterns, it is important to understand the current motivations to participate, and how these may differ across the lifespan and other demographics so that those in charge of managing sport organisations can better match sport participation offerings with consumer needs (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Further, sport offerings should match the changing desires and needs (motivations) of individuals. It is apparent that the traditional model of community club-based sport, in Australia at least, has not developed to match the changing societal preferences during leisure-time activities (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023).

Motivations to play sport

In seeking to understand motivations to play sport, we considered elements of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Fun Integration Theory (Visek et al., 2015), along with past

research on sport motivation (Ley, 2020; Lim et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2021; Stenner et al., 2020) that could inform our survey development. Self-Determination Theory provides an appropriate framework, as it describes the process through which motivation develops and how it influences behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory, in part, posits that individuals who satisfy three basic psychological needs (i.e. autonomy, competence & relatedness) will exhibit increased intrinsic motivation to engage in, and continue to be involved with, behaviours that foster well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is the drive to initiate activities that are inherently interesting and satisfying, whereas extrinsic motivation is undertaking activities to obtain external recognitions or reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Using the definitions of autonomy, competence and relatedness provided by Ryan and Deci (2000), we place these constructs in the context of playing sport as follows. Autonomy relates to a feeling that one has choice and a sense of willingness to play sport. Competence refers to one's need to experience effectiveness, which in this context leads to confidence to play sport. Lastly, relatedness is the need for connectedness with others, which pertains to being satisfied with the social setting in which sport is played, and having feelings of being accepted. If these psychological needs are fulfilled while playing sport, then intrinsic motivation is enhanced, which leads to longer-term participation in sport.

In line with the Self-Determination Theory, previous research has demonstrated that autonomy and choice to play sport is associated with the motivations of fun and enjoyment (Collins & Barcelona, 2018; R. Eime et al., 2013b; Foley et al., 2021; Visek et al., 2015). Not surprisingly, a positive experience in sport, on and off the field, contributes to enjoyment and thus intrinsic motivation to continue to play. When people play a sport of their choice, the enjoyment they experience is further facilitated through the social context (e.g. playing with friends or meeting new people) of participation in community club and team-based sport (R. Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b), which also links to the relatedness psychological need.

Research has shown that children and youth play sport because they are motivated by physical competence, social acceptance, and enjoyment (Lim et al., 2011; Visek et al., 2015). This earlier research then extends to the Fun Integration Theory (Visek et al., 2015), developed as a model explaining what makes playing sport fun, which separated the explanatory factors into four categories: contextual, internal, social and external. The highest rated determinants of fun for children were being good at sport, trying hard, and positive coaching (Visek et al., 2015).

There is much less literature on motivations of adults to play sport, but evidence indicates that motivations change over the lifespan. Many adult motivations to play sport are associated with relatedness and social interaction, with camaraderie and social opportunities being cited as well as competition (Lim et al., 2011). Adult males are more likely to be motivated by competition/performance than females, and health and fitness are high priorities for both adult males and females (Ley, 2020). For older adults, the main motivations are related to health benefits (social, mental and physical) of participation (Jenkin et al., 2021; Stenner et al., 2020). Other reasons for participation amongst older adults include a sense of achievement, competition and a chance to travel (Stenner et al., 2020), as well as social opportunities with family and friends (Jenkin et al., 2021).

In addition to age and motivation differences, motivations also vary according to gender, with women more likely than men to be motivated to play competitive sport because of intrinsic motivations, although this finding should be interpreted with caution given the gender imbalance of men- to women-only studies (Clancy et al., 2016). A review of motivations to play competitive sport also found that motivations differ according to sport type (Clancy et al., 2016). For example, individuals who are involved with adventure sports may be motivated by goal achievement, risk-taking, escaping from boredom, overcoming fear, and connecting with nature (Clancy et al., 2016). The interplay between motivational responses, such as effort, enjoyment and anxiety, may also differ between team and individual sports. Since independence is promoted when playing individual sports and interdependence emphasised in team sports (Blanchard et al., 2009), individual sport participants may be fulfilling a sense of autonomy or competence and team sport participants

satisfying a need for relatedness, which may lead to enhanced intrinsic motivation for both sport types, respectively (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Since our research investigates organised club-based sport where participants could arguably be adhering to sport participation regularly, many of these motivations for playing sport are informed by either Self-Determination Theory through (at least one of) the basic psychological needs that may increase intrinsic motivation or the Fun Integration Theory through increasing enjoyment for long-term adherence.

Most of the research on motivations to play sport has focused on children and youth only, and without a specific focus on the Australian sporting context. The aim of this study was to investigate the motivations to play sport in Australia across the following factors: age, gender, residential location, participation settings (e.g. clubs) and modes (e.g. individual, team), and level (frequency and duration) of participation.

Methods

An online survey of sport participants was conducted during May and June 2020 using the Qualtrics survey tool. As previously described (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023), recruitment to the survey was primarily facilitated by national and state sporting organisations. The target population was people aged 13 years or older who were registered with a State or National Sporting Organisation in the 2019 and/or 2020 playing seasons to participate in one or more sports. The sport organisations that sent out the survey invitation to their registered participants represent major sports in Victoria and Australia (Eime et al., 2020; R. Eime et al., 2019). The research team has extensive research experience in working with these sports at national, state and local levels (Eime, Charity, & Westerbeek, 2022; Eime, Harvey, & Charity, 2020; Eime, Harvey, et al., 2022; Jenkin et al., 2021). The survey was approved by the University Ethics Committee for research involving human participants, ID: HRE20–049. Informed consent to participate was obtained by participants and in the case of adolescents, a parent/caregiver provided consent.

The survey included questions about:

- Demographic characteristics – gender, age, and residential postcode
- Types of sports and other recreational physical activities participated in
- Frequency and duration of participation, at the time of the survey (May–June 2020) and during the previous year (2019)
- Motivations for organised club-based sport participation

Date of birth was used to determine age in years at the time the survey was completed. Age was then recoded into three age cohorts: adolescents (13–17 years), young and middle-aged adults (18–59 years) and older adults (60 years and above). Residential postcode correspondence tables (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) were used to assign each postcode to one of two broad geographical zones or regions: Metropolitan, comprising the capital cities of the Australian states; and Non-metropolitan, comprising regional cities, towns and rural areas.

Regarding sport and physical activity, two separate sections of the survey dealt respectively with two ‘sport and physical activity settings’: organised club sport involving membership and registration (designated ‘club’), and less structured sport and recreational physical activity (designated ‘informal’). In each section, a list of the most common activities was presented – 16 for club sports and 26 for informal (which also included 12 of the 16 club sports). Respondents indicated the activities in which they participated, with provision for adding other activities that were not listed. Based on these responses, a combined list of 88 activities was established. Further, each of the 88 activities was classified as either ‘team’ or ‘individual’, which we refer to as ‘sport and physical activity mode’. Each respondent was then assigned a single overall category for each of the settings (club only, club and informal, informal only, and inactive) and modes (team only, team and individual, individual only, inactive). The question about motivations for playing sport were not

applicable to the inactive and informal only categories, and so those categories were not included in the present study.

The number of reported sports and physical activities ranged from one to five (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2022). For each reported sport/activity, the duration of activity per fortnight in 2019 (pre-COVID-19) was estimated by multiplying the reported average session duration by the reported average number of sessions. The resulting estimates for each sport/activity were then totalled. Because of the seasonal nature of many sports/activities, for many individuals this total over-estimates the total duration of activity in any particular fortnight. Nevertheless, it provides an indication of the level of involvement across the year, and its tertiles provide an adequate basis for defining the three levels of activity (low, medium and high) used in this study.

Survey respondents who played club sport were asked to indicate their motivations, which were informed by past sport motivation research (e.g., Ley, 2020; Lim et al., 2011; Stenner et al., 2016), Self-Determination Theory, and Fun Integration Theory. Separately for each sport played, they were presented with the same list of motivations and asked to select whichever motivations applied to them for that particular sport. There was also provision for respondents to add other motivations in free text.

For the purpose of producing a broad overview of motivations for playing sport, for each respondent the motivations reported for each sport they participated in were coalesced into a single list of all motivations reported by the respondent. For each of the total list of motivations, an indicator variable was then derived, with each respondent assigned a value of 1 (motivation reported) or 0 (motivation not reported) for each motivation. The number and percentage of respondents reporting each motivation were tabulated, and cross-tabulated by demographic characteristics (gender, age and region) and categorical indicators of sport and physical activity participation (settings, modes and level of involvement), with chi-square tests of association. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24.

Results

A total of 4,395 survey respondents answered the questions on their motivations for playing sport. They included 2,822 women and girls and 1,553 men and boys, with ages ranging from 13 to 92 years ($M_{age} = 49$ years). Their responses are summarised in Table 1. The great majority of

Table 1. Overall profile of motivations reported.

Motivation	Count	%[a]
Fun/enjoyment	4,031	91.7
Performance or competition	3,400	77.4
Physical health or fitness (strength/conditioning/flexibility)	3,434	78.1
Professional/part of my job[b]	201	4.6
Psychological/mental health/therapy	2,103	47.8
Sense of achievement	2,495	56.8
Social reasons	3,178	72.3
To be with friends	2,878	65.5
To be a good role model/to encourage others to participate	1,148	26.1
To learn a new skill	925	21.0
To lose weight/keep weight off/tone	1,578	35.9
Other[c]	141	0.3
Number of respondents	4,395	580.5

[a]Percentage of respondents ($N = 4,395$) reporting the particular motivation. The total of these percentages indicates that respondents reported an average of just under 6 types of motivation (mean = 5.805).

[b]This item was only presented to adult respondents.

[c]The survey questionnaire included an open-ended 'Other – please specify' option. The final 'Other' category is an aggregation of these open-ended responses. Themes included: being outdoors (17 respondents), coaching (14), wanting to be a professional (12), family (8), support for children (7), volunteering (7), challenge (5), community involvement (5).

respondents reported that they played sport for fun and enjoyment (92%), followed by physical health or fitness reasons and performance or competition (78% and 77%, respectively). Other motivations reported by more than 50% of respondents included social reasons (72%), to be with friends (66%) and a sense of achievement (57%).

There were some similarities as well as some significant differences between male and female respondents regarding motivations to play sport (Table 2). Fun and enjoyment of participation was the main motivation for both males (91%) and females (93%). Males were significantly more likely (79%) than females (75%) to report playing motivation of performance/competition ($p < 0.05$), as well as more likely (5%) than females (4%) to report the motivation of being a professional sports person or playing is part of their job ($p = 0.03$). There were also several motivations that were significantly more likely to be reported by females than males. These include physical health or fitness (female 84%, male 75%; $p < 0.001$), a sense of achievement (female 61%, male 55%; $p < 0.001$), psychological or therapy (female 51%, male 47%; $p = 0.012$), to lose weight or tone body (female 39%, male 34%; $p = 0.002$), to be a good role model (female 29%, male 25%; $p < 0.05$) and to learn a new skill (female 28%, male 17%; $p < 0.001$).

The motivations to play sport were quite different across the different age groups of children/youth, adults and older adults (Table 2), with the main motivation across all ages being fun and enjoyment, which ranged from 91–92%. The younger cohort of children and youth aged 13–17 were significantly more likely (all $p < 0.001$) than the older players to report the motivations of physical health or fitness (86%) performance and competition (85%), a sense of achievement (67%), and to learn a new skill (44%). Adults aged 18–59 years were significantly more likely (all $p < 0.001$) than those younger, or older to be motivated to play sport for the following reasons: psychological or therapy (55%), to lose weight or tone body (43%), to be a good role model (31%), because they are a professional player, or it is part of their job (8%) and to coach (1%). The older adults (age 60+ years) were significantly more likely to be motivated to play sport because of social reasons (79%), and to be with friends (72%).

There were considerable differences in the motivations to play sport in metropolitan cities compared to regional and rural areas (Table 2). While fun and enjoyment was the main motivation with 92% of respondents within each region, those living in non-metropolitan regions were significantly more motivated than those in metropolitan cities to play sport for a range of factors including social reasons (75% versus 71%; $p = 0.01$), to be with friends (67% versus 64%; $p = 0.043$), to lose weight or tone body (38% versus 35%; $p = 0.04$), and to be a good role model (29% versus 25%; $p = 0.04$).

Sport can be played in club and/or informal settings. While the motivation question was asked only with respect to club settings, Table 2 demonstrates that, compared to those who played only in club settings, those playing in multiple settings (both club and informal) had significantly (all $p < 0.001$) higher motivations to play club sport across the following areas: fun and enjoyment, performance and competition, physical health or fitness, professional/part of job, psychological/therapy, sense of achievement, to be a good role model, to learn new skills, and to lose weight or tone body.

In terms of the mode of activity, those participating in team activities only, did not have any motivations that were significantly more frequently reported than those participating in individual sports only or in both team and individual sports. There was a significant result in relation to fun and enjoyment as a motivation, with those playing both team and individual sports being more likely to report this as a motivator (94%) compared to 90% for only individual sports and 87% for only team-based sports ($p < 0.001$). Persons playing individual sports only were significantly more likely to be motivated to play to advance physical health or fitness ($p < 0.001$), to be with friends ($p = 0.014$), for a sense of achievement ($p < 0.001$), for psychological/therapy ($p < 0.001$), and to lose weight or tone body ($p < 0.001$), as motivators. Those playing both team and individual sports were significantly more likely to report playing sport for fun and enjoyment, for social reasons, to be a good role model, and to learn new skills.

Table 2. Motivations reported: by respondent characteristics.

	Gender				
	Male		Female		
Motivation[a]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	p-value[b]
Fun/enjoyment	2,573	91.2	1,441	92.8	0.064
Performance/competition	2,222	**78.7**	1,165	75.0	0.005
Physical health or fitness	2,126	75.3	1,296	**83.5**	<0.001
Professional/part of job	144	**5.1**	57	3.7	0.030
Psychological/therapy	1,313	46.5	784	**50.5**	0.012
Sense of achievement	1,540	54.6	948	**61.0**	<0.001
Social reasons	2,039	72.3	1,128	72.6	0.788
To be with friends	1,844	65.3	1,024	65.9	0.693
To be good role model	696	24.7	449	**28.9**	0.002
To learn a new skill	487	17.3	435	**28.0**	<0.001
To lose weight/tone	967	34.3	606	**39.0**	0.002
Number of respondents	2822		1,553		

	Age						
	13–17 years		18–59 years		60+ years		
Motivation[a]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	p-value[b]
Fun/enjoyment	477	91.4	1,829	91.9	1,681	91.7	0.913
Performance/competition	444	**85.1**	1,511	75.9	1,409	76.8	<0.001
Physical health or fitness	451	**86.4**	1,576	79.2	1,378	75.1	<0.001
Professional/part of job	0	0.0	167	**8.4**	33	1.8	<0.001
Psychological/therapy	211	40.4	1,098	**55.2**	777	42.4	<0.001
Sense of achievement	350	**67.0**	1,031	51.8	1,091	59.5	<0.001
Social reasons	207	39.7	1,487	74.7	1,453	**79.2**	<0.001
To be with friends	353	67.6	1,169	58.7	1,320	**72.0**	<0.001
To be good role model	143	27.4	609	**30.6**	386	21.0	<0.001
To learn a new skill	228	**43.7**	377	18.9	311	17.0	<0.001
To lose weight/tone	148	28.4	847	**42.6**	573	31.2	<0.001
Number of respondents	522		1,990		1,834		

	Region				
	Metropolitan		Non-metropolitan		
Motivation[a]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	p-value[b]
Fun/enjoyment	2,579	91.5	1,443	92.2	0.408
Performance/competition	2,202	**78.1**	1,188	75.9	0.095
Physical health or fitness	2,209	78.4	1,217	77.8	0.646
Professional/part of job	136	4.8	65	4.2	0.309
Psychological/therapy	1,344	47.7	754	48.2	0.750
Sense of achievement	1,577	55.9	912	58.3	0.135
Social reasons	2,004	71.1	1,167	**74.6**	0.014
To be with friends	1,813	64.3	1,054	**67.3**	0.043
To be good role model	698	24.8	447	**28.6**	0.006
To learn a new skill	600	21.3	322	20.6	0.581
To lose weight/tone	981	34.8	593	**37.9**	0.041
Number of respondents	2,819		1,565		

	Sport and physical activity settings				
	Club only		Club and informal		
Motivation[a]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	p-value[b]
Fun/enjoyment	653	85.7	3,365	**93.1**	<0.001
Performance/competition	563	73.9	2,824	**78.1**	0.012
Physical health or fitness	511	67.1	2,915	**80.6**	<0.001
Professional/part of job	24	3.1	175	**4.8**	0.042
Psychological/therapy	318	41.7	1,783	**49.3**	<0.001
Sense of achievement	384	50.4	2,106	**58.2**	<0.001
Social reasons	567	74.4	2,605	72.0	0.184

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

To be with friends	510	66.9	2,362	65.3		0.396
To be good role model	160	21.0	983	**27.2**		<0.001
To learn a new skill	120	15.7	803	**22.2**		<0.001
To lose weight/tone	230	30.2	1,346	**37.2**		<0.001
Number of respondents	762		3,616			

	Sport and physical activity modes					
	Team only		Individual only		Team and individual	
Motivation[a]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	Count	%[c]	p-value[b]
Fun/enjoyment	439	86.4	1,114	89.8	2,477	**93.6**	<0.001
Performance/competition	376	74.0	959	77.3	2,064	78.0	0.140
Physical health or fitness	308	60.6	1,006	**81.1**	2,119	80.1	<0.001
Professional/part of job	22	4.3	50	4.0	129	4.9	0.479
Psychological/therapy	162	31.9	672	**54.1**	1,268	47.9	<0.001
Sense of achievement	228	44.9	738	**59.5**	1,528	57.8	<0.001
Social reasons	352	69.3	867	69.9	1,958	**74.0**	0.007
To be with friends	313	61.6	849	**68.4**	1,715	64.8	0.014
To be good role model	121	23.8	241	19.4	786	**29.7**	<0.001
To learn a new skill	83	16.3	180	14.5	661	**25.0**	<0.001
To lose weight/tone	117	23.0	497	**40.0**	963	36.4	<0.001
Number of respondents	508		1,241		2,645		

	Estimated duration of sport and physical activity per fortnight4					
	Low		Medium		High	
	≤480 min (8 hr)		481–960 min (8-16 hr)		960 min (16 hr)	
Motivation[a]	Count	%[3]	Count	%[3]	Count	%[3]	p-value[b]
Fun/enjoyment	1,346	89.4	1,372	**93.1**	1,313	92.7	<0.001
Performance/competition	965	64.1	1,210	82.1	1,225	**86.5**	<0.001
Physical health or fitness	1,129	75.0	1,159	78.7	1,146	**80.9**	0.001
Professional/part of job	66	4.4	61	4.1	74	5.2	0.347
Psychological/therapy	610	40.5	749	50.8	744	**52.5**	<0.001
Sense of achievement	674	44.8	878	59.6	943	**66.5**	<0.001
Social reasons	1,014	67.4	1,079	73.3	1,085	**76.6**	<0.001
To be with friends	832	55.3	963	65.4	1,083	**76.4**	<0.001
To be good role model	377	25.0	383	26.0	388	27.4	0.355
To learn a new skill	274	18.2	325	22.1	326	**23.0**	0.003
To lose weight/tone	499	33.2	526	35.7	553	**39.0**	0.004
Number of respondents	1,505		1,473		1,417		

[a]Abbreviated text. See Table 1 for the full text presented in the survey questionnaire.
[b]Chi-square tests of independence. Grey = not statistically significant.
[c]Percentage of respondents in each group reporting the particular motivation. Where differences between percentages are statistically significant, the higher/highest proportion is shown in boldface.
[d]The number of reported sports and physical activities ranged from one to five. For each reported sport/activity, the duration of activity per fortnight in 2019 (pre-COVID-19) was estimated by multiplying the reported average session duration by the reported average number of sessions. The resulting estimates for each sport/activity were then totalled. Because of the seasonal nature of many sports/activities, for many individuals this total over-estimates the total duration of activity in any particular fortnight. Nevertheless, it provides an indication of the level of involvement across the year, and its tertiles provide an adequate basis for defining the three levels of activity (low, medium and high) used in this study.

Higher levels of activity, including both organised sport and informal physical activity, were significantly associated with higher scores on most motivations (except professional/part of job and being a role model), compared to those who were less active. These motivations were: performance and competition, physical health or fitness, social reasons, be with friends, a sense of achievement, psychological/therapy, lose weight or tone body, and learn a new skill.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated motivations to play organised leisure-time club-based community sport in Australia, and the differences in motivations across gender, age, region and setting, mode and level of participation. We argued the importance of such analysis, in light of changes in participation patterns over recent years, and of changes in sport participants' motivations across the lifespan. Further, a range of social, economic and sport policy drivers in the Australian context, together with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has changed how people participate in sport (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2022), and brought into focus the importance of understanding what is really motivational for those who choose to participate in sport.

Overwhelmingly, the main motivation to play sport across all demographic groups and sport characteristics was fun and enjoyment. Other main motivations to play sport were physical health or fitness (which may promote autonomy), performance and competition, followed by social reasons (relatedness), to be with friends (relatedness), and for a sense of achievement (competence). Most of these main motivations can each be viewed in terms of the key basic psychological needs (i.e. autonomy, competence & relatedness) that promote intrinsic motivation according to the Self-Determination Theory (Vasconcellos et al., 2020). All of these motivations in some capacity (including performance and competition (R. Vallerand et al., 1987); would promote intrinsic motivation, which may lead to long-term adherence to organised club-based sport participation. Importantly, though, this research identifies that people who regularly participate in sport (based on the frequency data in this study) do so for mainly intrinsic motivational reasons, which may allow them to continue organised sport participation involvement. This is consistent with previous research which highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation and enjoyment in sport for participation (Côté & Hancock, 2016). Further, with regards to participation in community sport, intrinsic motivation is a predictor of enjoyment (Amado et al., 2015).

Among various definitions of sport a key defining aspect is its competitive nature (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). The objectives of organised club-based sport are to train and compete against other individuals and teams, striving to win matches in organised competitions. Although motivations related to performance and competition scored high in this study, this should be seen in perspective. While competition is a core component of organised sport, and as such will be part of all organised sport, 'playing to win' should not be overemphasised in creating sporting opportunities. When winning is emphasised from coaches, other teammates, or self-imposed, the pressure to win diminishes self-determination and intrinsic motivation even when clear winners are awarded during the competition (Reeve & Deci, 1996). Ryan and Reeve (2021) argued that when competition is experienced as controlling and pressure-filled, it undermines participant's autonomy and decreases intrinsic motivation, whereas when competition is non-controlling and competence-informed, then participants basic psychological needs of autonomy and competence are fulfilled, which enhances intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Reeve, 2021). This study was not a direct test of the Self-Determination Theory and competition specifically, so we can only speculate what competition and performance meant to each participant. Since these individuals are regular (based on our analysis of estimated duration of sport played per fortnight) consumers of organised sport playing at least eight hours per fortnight, it would appear that competition and performance are intrinsically motivating.

Non-sporting individuals who are active through fitness centres are significantly less likely than sports club participants to be motivated by performance or competition (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023; R. Vallerand et al., 1987). R. Vallerand et al. (1987) explains that a focus on winning and competition may decrease intrinsic motivation for an activity due to the ego involvement it promotes. Thus, those individuals who may not be competitive or not driven to win may struggle to play organised sport. As such, sporting organisation

should be careful on promoting competitive/performance-based motivators to sport participation, and at least in part, develop less competitive and fun/enjoyable methods of sport participation.

Other intrinsically motivating reasons – to have fun with others, be healthy and socialise with others – are key motivators that drive people to play organised sport. This is in line with previous research highlighting the intrinsic motivations for people to play sport (Dixon, 2018), including e-sports (Mechelin & Liu-Lastres, 2023) and the importance of fun and enjoyment (indicated through aspects of the Fun Integration Theory), which is further enhanced through the social setting of club-based sport (Collins & Barcelona, 2018; R. Eime et al., 2013b; Foley et al., 2021; Visek et al., 2015). Fun and enjoyment are related to autonomy as participation in community sport is a choice and not a chore and when individuals participate in activities by choice they have more fun (R. Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b). Further the concept of choice (closely linked to autonomy within the Self-Determination Theory) and fun playing sport are a contributing factor to improved psychological health (R. Eime et al., 2013a). The social aspects of sport are also linked to relatedness in the Self-Determination Theory since individuals enjoy playing sport as part of a team and club.

There are considerable differences in motivation for participating in organised sport between genders. In the present study, men were more motivated to play sport to perform, compete, and be a professional athlete, whereas women were more motivated to play sport for physical and mental health, to lose weight, to be a good role model, and to learn a new skill. These results support previous research findings that men are more motivated by competition and women by developing and maintaining fitness (Egli et al., 2011; Moradi et al., 2020; Soares et al., 2013). In addition (Cerar et al., 2017), reported that male participants' motives included challenge and competition, while female participants' motives included weight management and positive health. Historically, competitive sport has been dominated by male participation and is associated with masculinity, which includes stereotypical traits such as opposition, competitiveness, and winning (English, 2017). Research has demonstrated that gender stereotypes influence children's socialisation in sport (Chalabaev et al., 2013; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006)The socialisation of boys in competitive sport could explain their motivation to play sport to win. Furthermore, men and boys tend to have higher perceptions of their competence in sport than women and girls (Chalabaev et al., 2013), which may help them adhere to organised sport participation given competence is a basic psychological need within the Self-Determination Theory. In contrast, typical female sports have been associated with feminine characteristics such as aesthetics and physical expression (Chalabaev et al., 2013), which could explain why female participants focus more on their body image.

The motivations to play sport also differed across the lifespan. Young people (aged 13–17 years) were more motivated for physical health or fitness, performance, and competition as well as a sense of achievement and to learn new skills. Adults aged 18–59 were much less motivated by performance and competition incentives and played more for health reasons (including mental health and losing weight), to be a good role model or for their job/career which included playing and coaching. Older adults were more likely to be motivated to play for social reasons, which included being with their friends. In summary, although this is not a longitudinal study, across the lifespan, our data indicates that children start playing in order to compete and develop their skills (competence), adults become more motivated for health reasons and to help others, and older adults increasingly choose to play sport for social reasons. These findings highlight the changing nature of sport participation across the lifespan, which are similar to those of other research (Jenkin et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2011; Stenner et al., 2020).

Arguably, in community sport settings the focus remains on creating sporting environments that accommodate for the motivations of young people, rather than developing bespoke offerings to accommodate changing motivations across the lifespan. Most adults do not play sport for competition and winning, and older adults play for social engagement (as found in this study). Consequently, the traditional model of club-based sport organised around competitions, which is offered in Australia, does not cater well for these changing age-related motivations. Eime et al.

(2022) demonstrated the significant decline in participation in competitive sport during adolescence and that very few adults play community sport (Eime, Charity, & Westerbeek, 2022).

This study also demonstrated that the motivations to play sport differed according to residential location. Those in regional areas were more motivated for social reasons, to be with friends, to lose weight, and to be a good role model, whereas participants living in metropolitan cities were more motivated to be outdoors, to support their children, and to be a professional athlete. These differences are likely to derive from quite considerably different living conditions. For example, in regional areas where people are more isolated and have fewer options for leisure-time activities, coming together as communities for sport is an important part of the local culture within Australia (Eime et al., 2017; R. M. Eime et al., 2015). In contrast, people living in cities with higher population density strive for open-space and to get outdoors, which allow for more opportunities for young people to participate in sport development pathways in cities compared to rural regions (Eime et al., 2017; R. M. Eime et al., 2015).

There were significant differences between the motivations of those playing team versus individual sports. As might be expected, those playing team sports are largely driven by motivators that involve, or indeed require, the participation of others, which links to the basic psychological need of relatedness within the Self-Determination Theory. Participants in individual sports seek to predominantly play for personal reasons, such as to improve physical and psychological health, to experience a sense of achievement, and to lose weight. However, it is not all about them, as they also seek to be with friends.

Respondents with higher levels of sport participation reported most motivators more frequently (and hence could be argued to be more intrinsically motivated) than those with less frequent sport participation. We could strongly argue that individuals engage in sport participation more frequently because they are continuously fulfilling the basic psychological needs as described within the Self-Determination Theory, or enjoying their sport participation through explanations of the Fun Integration Theory, which drives their intrinsic motivation to continue playing sport (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, those with less sport participation involvement may not have developed the strong internalised connections to the sport, as explained within the Self-Determination Theory, to facilitate more intrinsic motivation that comes with more frequently reported motivations.

Nevertheless, based on the high volume of motivations provided for the different levels of sport participation collectively, it seems probable that participants at all levels of sport participation in this study showed some level of intrinsic motivation or passion for playing sport. R. Vallerand et al. (2003) defined passion as a strong inclination towards a self-defining activity that one likes, finds important and meaningful, and in which one invests time and energy (R. Vallerand et al., 2003). Clearly, participants at all levels of sport in this study invested time and energy to participate. R. J. Vallerand (2012) suggested that the difference between passion and intrinsic motivation is that passion involves an activity that is both meaningful for the person and part of one's identity, whereas intrinsic motivation need not be meaningful or relate to identity (R. J. Vallerand, 2012). Passion is a stronger concept that is linked to intrinsic motivation. Although speculative, participants at the low level of sport participation could have found sport participation intrinsically motivating because they largely enjoyed sport (among other possible motivators listed in our study), otherwise they would not spend so much time in the activity. Those participants on the high level of sport participation could be playing sport because of their passion for the sport with accompanied meaning and sport identity, which makes it more intrinsically motivating and leads to increased adherence and more reported motivations. R. J. Vallerand (2012) also proposed the concepts of obsessive and harmonious passion (R. J. Vallerand, 2012). Obsessive passion is when a person has an uncontrollable urge to participate in an activity that they think is enjoyable, where the activity potentially controls them, whereas harmonious passion is when individuals freely choose to perform the activity without the overwhelming urge to engage in it. Furthermore, Lafreniere

et al. (2008) found that individuals who have established harmonious passion tend to develop and maintain better relationships within a similar sport (Lafreniere et al., 2008). To add additional links to our speculative hypothesis, it could be argued that many participants in the high level of sport participation group likely experience harmonious passion given the high percentages of motivations related to social reasons and to be with friends. Developing intrinsic motivation and/or passion for sport participation in those who are not regular sport consumers will benefit not only sport organisations (i.e. increased numbers because intrinsic motivation is linked to enjoyment (Amado et al., 2015; Côté & Hancock, 2016), but also the individuals themselves (i.e. through physical, mental, and social health benefits; R. Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b).

Our results may indicate that organised club-based sport participants are intrinsically motivated, through elements of the Self-Determination Theory, to engage in and adhere to prolonged sport participation. For example, fun and enjoyment are linked to autonomy, learning the skills to play sport relate to competency, and the social nature of participation in team and club-based sport is associated with relatedness (Vasconcellos et al., 2020). It is important that we consider how individuals' motivations to play sport are connected, because the basic psychological needs associated with the listed motivations can influence increased and continued sport participation.

Conclusion

In this study, we have specifically focused on participation in organised sport across the lifespan and across different demographic factors such as gender, by region and sport participation characteristics. Given the changes to participation in sport over recent years it is important to understand current motivations to play and how these differ according to different population demographics (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023; Litchfield & Elliott, 2021). Our findings concur with others who advocate for sport policy development and product/program content to be better aligned with playing formats that match the motivations and enjoyment of participants (Eime, Westerbeek, et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Litchfield & Elliott, 2021), Further, it is pleasing to see that this is also acknowledged in the most recent Australian sport participation strategy (Australia, 2023). This requires a change of focus towards more flexible, inclusive, equitable sporting opportunities that focus on making friends, having fun, developing skills, competency and motivations (physical literacy (Visek et al., 2015; Whitehead, 2001), and allowing participants to play (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023). Providing such opportunities to the sport participation market should not be limited to club-based sport organisations, but rather is an open field of play for those who best listen to, and accommodate for, the needs of participants. To that end, and as an aspirational conclusion, we feel that our data justifies us making the following recommendation.

A 'generic' sport offering to sport participants can be based on the core element of competitive sport, but should also include a focus on fun, fitness and friends. In order to then better target sport offerings across the lifespan, fun and well-organised (pathway) competitions should dominate the offering for young people (Eime, Harvey, et al., 2023). During adulthood, competition diminishes in importance, and fun and fitness should become the focus for adults. Older adults are better provided for through sporting opportunities that facilitate social connectedness. These recommendations may seem obvious. However, both club-based sport organisations and policy makers alike have continued to primarily focus on recruitment of new participants, and consequently to focus almost exclusively on offerings aligned with the motivations of young players. It is recommended that a wider perspective encompassing the three elements of the basic psychological needs of the Self-Determination Theory be consulted when developing and delivering sport participation opportunities, because fun and enjoyment (autonomy), skill development (competency), and connections with others (relatedness) are important motivations to play sport for all ages, genders, location, modes, and frequency (or non-frequency) of participation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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