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## The Motivation of Seniors: Why They Participate in the Senior Games

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THE MOTIVATION OF SENIORS: WHY THEY PARTICIPATE IN THE SENIOR GAMES

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Master's Project

Submitted to the School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies  
Bowling Green State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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In  
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## Introduction

### Purpose of the study

The Senior Games, which is also known as Senior Olympics, is a national/state sport event for individuals who are the age of 50 and over. The first National Senior Games began in 1987, drawing a total of 2,500 athletes from the United States (Blount, 2015); nowadays, this event has already become a magnet for seniors who want to participate in sports competition. The 2013 National Senior Games in Cleveland attracted a total of 10,800 competitors from around the country (Blount, 2015). The Senior Games is held by the National Senior Olympics Organization (NSOO), as the original founders aimed to develop healthy lifestyles for seniors through fitness, education and sports.

It was well known that physical exercise can promote healthy lifestyles and physical condition of human beings, and many research studies have been done to investigate the motives and benefits of youth and adults to exercise. However, few researchers spent their time studying the motivational orientations of elderly adults to participate in activities, exercise or sports.

About 30 years ago, the United States rapidly began to enter an aging society when the baby boomers started retiring. Furthermore, every month, there are more than 250,000 people in America who turn 65 (Casselmann, 2014). Hence, the first purpose of this study is to reveal the reasons seniors give for participating in sports. As a result, the Senior Games is a logical senior sport event for researchers to study.

Another purpose of this study is to analyze the benefits senior athletes can receive from sports. Based on previous research, leisure activities have three significant benefits. Firstly, leisure activities can create psychological benefits; leisure activities can provide social support to seniors; finally, leisure activities can enhance physical health of seniors (Kim, Heo & Stebbins, 2013). In order to understand the meanings of sports to elder athletes, it is necessary to figure out even more benefits that sports can offer to senior athletes.

### Research questions

To summarize, this study puts forward three basic research questions:

- (1) What are the motives of seniors engaging in the Senior Games?
- (2) What are the changes seniors made from being a senior athlete?
- (3) What is the difference in motivation between male and female athletes who participate in the Senior Games?

### Research design

In order to answer the questions of this research, the study of this design is based on the official interviews of 40 senior athletes in the 2015 National Senior Games and previous research. Qualitative research was selected as the research method of this study, as it is an effective research method to analyze and investigate social issues. Furthermore, every senior athlete's voice from the interview is significant to this research; when interviewees describe their experience in as much detail as they can, they might provide information with diverse answers so that researchers can consider issues in different aspects.

### Significance of the study

This study aims to figure out the exact reasons of why seniors participate in sports, which is the primary research question in this study; the success of this study can trigger more seniors to participate in sports. Investigating the benefits that senior athletes gained from engaging in sports might change the attitudes of seniors who were reluctant to participate in sports. The second significance is that the study might ignite other countries, which have aging populations with few national/regional senior events (e.g. China), to pay attention to host senior sport events (Chen, 2010). This study is also significant because the results might provide effective information for future research.

### Literature Review

In order to provide a foundation to this study, several theoretical foundations need to be written to support the research. The researcher reviewed the conceptual theories about participation motivation, competence motivation theory, and self-determination theory; the purpose of the Senior Games; the aging situation in America; and Title IX. In addition, based on previous study, the researcher also summarized previous findings.

### *Participation motivation*

Participation motivation refers to the reasons people start or continue participating in sports or physical activities (Horn, 2007). So far, many studies focused on investigating participation motivations in youth and professional athletes, and they found that usually there was more than one reason that athletes are encouraged to participate in sports (Weinberg & Gould, 2015).

From the stand point of history, early researchers divided sport participation motivation into four main reasons, including having fun, becoming physically fit, learning and improving skills, and being with friends (Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978). Over 1000 athletes involved in Sapp and Haubenstricker's study were 11-18 years old players (Martins, Honório, Cardoso, & Duarte, 2014). Although this early study involved both males and females, and targeted young athletes, this research did not consider the gender and age differences, and it did not mention the influences of different sports (Horn, 2007).

Early research that studied participation motivation was seeking answers from children's perspective. Based on Sapp and Haubenstricker's four themes, after 1980, Weiss, Amorose, and Kipp (2012) led a participation motivation study across age groups (e.g., youth & adult), multiple sports, and gender difference (Weiss & Frazer, 1995). Several common reasons why people participate in sports were concluded by Weiss' research: (a) developing or demonstrating physical competence, (b) gaining social acceptance/approval, and (c) enjoying the experience (Horn, 2007). However, much research had been done to investigate motives of why people participate in sports, and researchers were aware that age difference was a crucial variable. This point is necessary to be considered in motivational studies.

### *Competence Motivation Theory*

In 1943, the psychologist Maslow originally came up with a theory of human motivation. Maslow's (1943) theory divided human needs into five basic categories, including physiological,

safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Human beings are perpetually eternally wanting animal, so people possess different levels of these five needs, but the needs show up at different times depending on the degree of urgency (Maslow, 1943).

According to Maslow's theory, the satisfaction of human needs is gradually transferred from outside to inside, which means when people are satisfied with basic needs (e.g., food & shelter), they will pursue higher level needs (e.g., self-actualization) to achieve complete satisfaction. In order to reach self-actualization, people need to become what they are capable of being.

Boekaerts (1991) suggested that perceived competence could be used as an assessment tool to self-evaluate capability in a specific situation.

People participate in physical activities usually for intrinsic pleasure such as enjoyment (Horn, 2007). In 1978, Harter came up with the competence motivation theory and developed her theory in 1981; she referred to the theory as "an educationally relevant approach to understanding motivation in achievement domains such as sport" (Horn, 2007, p.118 ). The theory illustrated individuals were usually involved in a social or physical environment intrinsically, and the interaction relationship exists between motives and experienced feelings (White, 1959).

The relationship could be thought of as a circulation; when people participate in an activity, social approval and perceived ability determine the competence motivation, and the motives intrinsically trigger people to take part in an activity, then participants would receive enjoyment from the experience and performance outcome. Depending on the degree of enjoyment and the results of performance, they would alter the competence motivation (Harter, 1981).

According to Harter's theory model, several sources (parents, coaches, and peers) were involved to influence the motives (Horn, 2007). The first influence is parents. In accordance with this, some researchers found that children's beliefs, attitudes and values depend on parents' choice, so when children choose what kind of sport to play, the attitude of parents is significant (Amado, Sanchez-Miguel, Loe, Sanchez-Oliva & Caecia-Calvo, 2013). Furthermore, Amado et al.'s study (2013) showed that there was a positive relationship between the support of parents and the degree of children's enjoyment from the sport. When parental support turns into over-involvement with children's growth, this impacts children's performance in sports both consciously and unconsciously (Quinton, 2013).

For instance, football is a controversial sport in America; on the one hand, this aggressive sport provides great visual entertainment for an audience. On the other hand, large numbers of concussions and some other perpetual impairments lead many parents to worry about their next generation. Whether or not to allow kids to play football is a concern to many parents. Under this situation, once parents do not allow their children to play football, kids may feel that they have to join football teams even though they do not want to.

Coaches also play a significant role in an individual's competence perception, especially in young athletes (Horn, 2002). Similar to the role of parents, coaches have a powerful impact on athletes as a social agent. In addition, the praise and criticism of athletes would reinforce or impair the self-evaluation of athletes (Horn, 2007).

The last factor is peers. Peers like teammates and friends also significantly affect the

competence perception. Close friends and teammates influence each other on emotional experience, behaviors, motivational orientations, and performance (Horn, 2007). To consider the peers' function, some researchers concluded doing peer-reviewed survey among elite athletes could influence athletes' behaviors (Bennett, et al, 2008).

In conclusion, understanding the competence motivation theory is very important for a researcher to lead this study, and this theory is one of the basic theories to investigate the motives of athletes' participation in sports. However, the targeted groups mentioned by Harter and other researchers above are young athletes; the objects of this study are senior athletes, so different variables might result in different outcomes. Hence, this theory could not completely apply to senior athletes.

### *Self-Determination Theory*

The competence theory concluded motives as intrinsic property. Self-determination theory (SDT) defined motivation not only on the layer of intrinsic property but also extrinsic trait (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The SDT described extrinsic motives as cognition, social environment and individual differences (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, the contribution of SDT was not only applied to the motivation study but also on personality research (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Three types of motivation were concluded in the SDT. First of all, amotivation is a type that means individuals complete a task with no or extremely low level interest. From the stand point of sports, when individuals participate in sports with amotivation, they do not know why they play the sport and they do not know what they can receive from the sport (Racine, 2013). The

second type is extrinsic motivation, which is caused by external sources (i.e. parents) and environments (Honeybourne, 2005). This point perfectly related to the competence motivation theory. As Quinton (2013) mentioned above, parents play a significant role in influencing children's behaviors and value. Extrinsic motivation could be divided into four specific categories: (a) external, (b) introjected, (c) identified, and (d) integrated; all of these categories could be illustrated as either gaining social acceptance/approval or satisfying other people (Horn, 2007). People in this type clearly know why they do the tasks and the benefits of the tasks.

The last type of motivation is intrinsic motivation. This type of motivation is the highest level of self-determination. People in this type actively participate in sports; they not only understand the reasons and benefits but also gain achievement from sports (Cox, 2007). People with intrinsic motivation chasing their goals also reach Maslow's fifth stage of self-actualization.

#### *An overview of the Senior Games*

At any age, playing games can keep the brain active and physically fit (Heid, 2014). The National Senior Games Association (NSGA) defined the Senior Games as consisting of multiple sport events, and it provides an opportunity for seniors at the age of 55 and over to participate in sports. The Games are hosted in different places every time; the purposes of the Games might vary on account of the economy and community culture of the host place.

For instance, the Senior Games which were hosted in Bradenton, Florida in 2011. One of the purposes of the city was to provide a senior event for local seniors to compete at the regional and national level, and the government of Bradenton also hoped to develop affordable multiple sport

events for local seniors (“How it”, n.d.). Minneapolis, Bloomington and Saint Paul in Minnesota cooperated to host the 2015 National Senior Games. Local organizers estimated that the Games could create \$35 million revenue for the three cities (Blount, 2015). Although the NSGA is a non-profit organization to organize the Games, as the event continues, more and more seniors are willing to participate in sports, and the Senior Games today is becoming a profitable event.

Even though the different motives encourage local organizers to host the Games, the common purpose can be concluded. The mission of the Senior Games is to provide an opportunity for seniors to maintain or develop their health and wellness (NSGA, n.d.). So whether Minnesota, Florida or other hosting places are also trying to make profits, promoting physical and mental health are the primary purposes of the Games.

Senior does not mean what people usually think because this identity does not mean elderly, and many people over 50 years old are still working (Hlavacek, 2015). Hence, the competition level is not as low as people may think. Furthermore, some seniors were former professional athletes and former Olympic athletes (Hlavacek, 2015), so those seniors are capable of competing at a high level.

In addition, many people consider the Senior Games as a slow sport event, since card games and bingo seem like the primary games for seniors (Heid, 2014). However, the Senior Games consist of 19 sports, including volleyball, tennis, swimming, track & field, basketball, etc (Bush, n.d.). From the stand point of the kinds of sports, the Senior Games do not have many differences from regular games.

Admittedly, the Senior Games are no longer an elementary level competition, and some senior athletes were former professional athletes. Still, age is a main concern for hosting the Games. A study separated age into two groups, 55-64 years and 65 years and older (Casper & Bentov, 2013). It found that the functionality of a 55 year old man might be quite different from someone who is 85 years old (Casper & Bentov, 2013).

Hlavacek (2015) also confirmed that seniors might not feel old at 50, and many in the age group between 50 to 60 are still working. Nonetheless, approximately 100 senior athletes aged 90 and over took part in the 2015 National Senior Games; the competition is a lifelong special journey for them (Bradbury, 2015). In brief, when researchers study the motivations of why seniors participate in sports, it is significant to attach importance to the different ages of senior athletes.

#### *Aging in the United States*

The population who are ages 18-34 as of 2015 are also called “Millennials”, have surpassed the 74.9 million Baby Boom generation (ages 51-69) to become the largest living generation in the United States (Fry, 2015). Even though the baby boomers are no longer dominating the population of America, the increasing age of this generation does not stop, and they are still a large population in this nation.

30 years ago, the Baby Boomers were the main laborers in the United States, and this generation witnessed the sharp rise of this nation. But the retirement of these former main laborers makes this generation gradually fade out of the dominant position to boost the

development in America.

Being old does not mean being frail; several myths exist in the aging society in the United States. From the standpoint of politics and the economy, the young and the old ineluctably compete with each other (Rowe, et al, 2009). Some sociologists claimed that elderly people only vote for some candidates or policy that support seniors' programs, and they will group to vote old-age benefits.

But sociologist Rowe (2009) and his research group disagree with this claim; in fact, he and his team found that different seniors have different standpoints in politics, economy, race, and social status (Rowe, 2009), so it is hard for them to unite for voting. Furthermore, Rowe (2009) also pointed out that seniors strongly express their support for young education programs and benefits, and they also made contributions supporting government financial assistance to the poor (Rowe, 2009).

In addition, nowadays, the United States is accelerating into an aging society but built for the young (Badger, 2014). It does not mean the society should pay all attention to build a cozy environment for seniors, but when the society focuses on the needs of young generations, it would frequently overlook the needs of the older generation. Another equivalently important issue also needs to attract more public attention. A Harvard researcher Nelson (2011) stated that if large numbers of Baby Boomers do not live in their houses, there will not be enough young people have the ability to take over those houses. If so, the real estate industry will take a heavy toll (Badger, 2014).

## *Title IX*

Men earned more chances than women to control the right to speak in sport and higher education in America until 1970s (Mortenson, 1991). While the numbers of academic achievements of women in education had been dramatically increased before 1970s (Mortenson, 1991), the comparison of more academic attainments but less opportunity in educational sports available to female put the field in the center of political and ethical debates at that time.

Because female students suffered sex discrimination in education until the early 1970s, fewer opportunities for females to take part in sports, and fewer working opportunities provided for females in administrative and coach positions in higher education; sexual harassment also happened on females when they were at work or at schools (Brodsky & Deutsch, 2015). Based on the sexual harassment and sex discrimination, Title IX was put forward to prohibit discrimination based on race, nationality, and gender in education (Brodsky & Deutsch, 2015). This protection benefits females from kindergarten to graduate programs in every educational institution in the United States (Brodsky & Deutsch, 2015). Part of the law stipulated that:

*“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”*

*-----Education Amendments of 1972. Public Law No. 92-318, 86 Stat. 235*

According to the Amendment upheld by the relevant court decisions, any educational institution needs to meet any one of the three prongs during athletic recruitment. First of all, the

participation opportunity of females needs to be substantially proportional to the numbers of female enrollment in undergraduate (Richman Times-Dispatch, 2012), which means how many female students in a school's enrollment, then how many female athletes should be recruited in the school. The second prong outlined an institution must show a history of continuing expansion of athletic opportunities for females (Richman Times-Dispatch, 2012). The last prong stipulated a school needs to effectively accommodate the ability and interests of female athletes (Richman Times-Dispatch).

After the enactment and evolvement of Title IX, women received more equivalent opportunities to participate in sports and education. Even though some experts criticized Title IX as simply outlined general rules to protect female's rights and it cannot fully address the discrimination based on sex (Brodsky & Deutsch, 2015), the National Women's Law Center is still devoted to eliminating barriers in sports for women in the parameter of Title IX (40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Title IX, 2016). They are trying to provide more opportunities for female athletes to participate in sports not only enlarging the numbers but also cultivating a more accommodating environment for females.

#### *Previous research results*

In the 1980s, researchers started studying the participation motivation in youth sports (McCullagh, et al, 1993), and the performance and motivation of professionals were studied for a long time (Horn, 2007); but not much research focused on senior athletes. Based on current existing research, 5 main reasons were found, including (a) physical improvement, (b)

psychological improvement, (c) social experience, and (d) family and (e) friends.

Physical fitness is the primary concern for both aging seniors and the NSGA. Benefits of exercise are obvious, for example, people who exercise have a better health outlook than sedentary people. Applying this motive to seniors, in 2011, more than 1800 seniors participated in a survey about what seniors want to receive from doing exercise (MS, 2011). From this survey, most of them reported that they felt dissatisfied with their physical condition, and a little dissatisfied with their appearance (MS, 2011). A study also showed that aging women exercise because they had more concerns about appearance and body image (Whaley, 2003).

Besides the better health look, another motive that encourages seniors to participate in sports is exercise can decrease the risk of disease. Fife (2008) led the research in the participants in the 2010 Indiana State Senior Games. The questionnaire in this research focused on the reasons for seniors to exercise. He found that improving physical health, reducing stress level and tension were the most important motivations (Fife, 2008).

Similar to Fife's (2008) study, Akitunde (2012) also confirmed that doing exercise is a way to change eating disorder problems. She conducted an interview with a woman with an eating disorder problem; the woman was obsessed with food but threw it up after eating, and the situation got worse in her 50s. It took exercise to change her eating habits, even though she started over-exercising when she felt better about her eating disorder (Akitunde, 2012). In addition, Kim, Ymada, Heo, and Han (2014) conducted a qualitative study that involved people over 65, and where the average age of these participants was 71; they found that leisure activities

can reduce risks of disease and chronic illness (Kim, et al, 2014).

Doing exercise can reduce heart disease (Mills, 2005) because it can make the muscles of the heart stronger (Chen, 2014), and a suitable exercise can lower the level of triglyceride and overall cholesterol, which are the factors that could cause various types of illness (Mills, 2005).

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that the rates of overweight and obesity of aging baby boomers is on the rise (Sifferlin, 2014), and Nordqvist (2011) also stated that obesity is the main health problem to baby boomers. Until 2014, 72% of male seniors and 67% of female seniors were overweight and obese (Sifferlin, 2014).

With aging processing, the body function of human beings would become more brittle than before. A researcher designed a study to examine the differences between physical training and age-related variables. The first aim of the study was to examine whether aging is an aspect to impact the braking force in walking (Maillot, Hartley & Manh-Cuong, 2014). The results showed that older people were weaker at braking force control rather than young people (Maillot, et al., 2014).

In addition, Maillot, et al. conducted another study by using the same participants to evaluate the effects of exergame training on balance, functional fitness, and health-related quality of life. The study also found that braking force ability and mental health of seniors could be significantly improved after training (Maillot, et al., 2014). Similar with Maillot's (2013) research, Granacher and his partners also claimed that exercise training could help seniors to rebuild and enhance their muscle strength. Keeping muscle strength in good condition could

benefit body balance, functional performance and prevention of falls (Granacher, et al, 2013).

The second aspect of findings in previous research is psychological benefit. As the researcher mentioned before, with the retirement of Baby Boomers, they may expect a time to relax.

However, when people enter into the senior stage of their life, many stresses would come with them. The Senior Games has the ability to bring mental improvements to senior citizens. Early researchers found that seniors might feel stressful when they deal with chronic illness and the loss of family members and friends (Rodin, 1986).

But Aldwin stated that seniors do not have many differences in stress compared to young people. Pressures would produce when they face a new job, have new generations, start a new marriage, and get a divorce (Aldwin, 1996). Combining previous studies, seniors seem to have at least equivalent pressure compared to younger age groups because they might experience more losses and suffer more illness (Franks, 2015).

Learning to mediate stress in the retired life is significant to seniors; one tip for them is to take part in outdoor exercise (Bemis, 2016). Fife (2008) not only found that physical activity can improve body health but also reduce levels of stress and tension, and mental health of seniors could be significantly improved after systematic training (Maillot, et al., 2014). Hence, promoting mental health can motivate seniors to participate in the Senior Games.

Social experience is another important motivation. Different from the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers are more educated, so the higher education gave them greater accessibility to enter into the economy, politics, and cultural arenas (Brandon, 2008). As the generation that witnessed the

rise of this country, Baby Boomers are the richest generation in United States' history (Brandon, 2008). When the “gold” generation gradually turns into “silver”, their social life would also change.

In 2012, Diller did a study to explore the psychological changes as people aged. People who had fond adolescent memories such as being queen bees and team leaders often report greater struggle with the aging process (Diller, 2012). Some people are still keeping their youthful self-image rather than admitting they are aging now, and they are reluctant to let their glories be in the past (Diller, 2012). However, this situation would result in a harder time as they try to hold on to every youthful thing, and they would have less confidence to lead their later life.

Furthermore, large numbers of Baby Boomers are willing to continue their working careers. Many of them even want to do some part-time jobs to hold their value to society (Tacchino, 2013).

Adapting to retired life is a challenge to the majority of seniors because they believe they can do more than retiring (Tacchino, 2013). People who cannot adapt to their retired life might isolate themselves from others; even though they stand in a crowd, they still feel lonely (Stevenson, 2014). Hence, Blount (2015) found that people who take part in the Senior Games seemed to seek their glories back. Meeting new people, learning new skills, and competing in a new environment can help retirees to experience former social life.

Furthermore, based on previous research, many senior athletes were former professional athletes, some of them were even Olympians (Hoar, et al, 2012). They used to be stars in public,

but aging with lower performance and weaker body conditions made them quit playing.

Participating in the Senior Games is a way to help them return to competitive sports; some athletes admitted that when they race in the competition, they would also have the pre-competitive stress like before (Hoar, et al, 2012).

Although competitiveness is an essential spirit in the Senior Games, many athletes claimed that the purpose of the game is not pursuing championship (Erickson, 2015). Experiencing social life is more important than chasing gold medals for the most part for senior athletes. Erickson (2015) conducted an interview with two senior athletes in the 2015 National Senior Games. Both of them agreed that meeting new people is their primary motive for joining the Senior Games. In addition, many people came to sports later in life. They are newcomers to sports, so enjoying the game and making more friends are more important reasons. What is more, some competitors become lifetime friends to each other (Pardue, 2015).

Besides seeking glory and having fun, many females participate in the Senior Games for another social experience—sports opportunity. Many Baby Boomers grew up before the enactment of Title IX, so there were few sports opportunities for women offered by schools before that time (Wohlenhaus, 2015). The Senior Games has more than 20 kinds of sports that allow seniors to compete with each other. It provides multiple sport choices for seniors. They can not only play as an individual but also as a team. Some researchers found that more females than males entered the Senior Games because they want to experience the sports which they had never gone through (Blount, 2015).

Prior to 1970, women's sports in college and high school levels were hardly to be recognized by people because girls play sports only in the intramural settings (Bell, 2008). Most college sports were still recreational sports rather than competitive sports (Bell, 2008); even though some schools had the ability to create sports teams for females, the rules of women's sports were different from men's sports (Cain, 2001). For instance, before Title IX, girls' basketball was prevalent in college, but few schools had teams or courts for girls to play (Cain, 2001). In early women's basketball, the rules required six players in the court, and no one was allowed to cross the center line (Cain, 2001).

All rules were modified based on the public perceptions of females. Female Physical Education, which makes rules for female PE classes, believed that allowing female students to play competitive sports would increase too many pressures on them, and spectators would pay more attention to the attire of female athletes rather than the game itself (Cain, 2001). So in early women's basketball, players did not have a full court and jersey (Cain, 2001); these general rules and limitations resulted in the early women's basketball being looked down by public.

In a summary, as the generation that did not grow up with the support of Title IX, female Baby Boomers might have experienced less collegiate sports memories than males; now they have more reasons to participate in the Senior Games rather than watching male counterparts playing. Participating in sports might be a new experience for many female Baby Boomers in particular, and previous researchers found that females have significantly higher satisfaction when they participate in the Senior Games than men (Cardenas, Henderson, & Wilson, 2009).

## **Method**

The primary research questions of this study are: (1) What are the motives of seniors engaging in the Senior Games? (2) What are the changes seniors made from being a senior athlete? (3) What are the different orientations between male and female senior athletes in the Senior Games? In order to understand the motives and changes of senior athletes, this study will utilize qualitative research methods to investigate the research questions.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to analyze science and social science questions (Jones, 2013), but qualitative research can provide more detailed information about human behaviors, personality characteristics, and emotions rather than quantitative research (Madrigal & McClain, 2012). In addition, when researchers study social science topics, they can hardly analyze data from numbers; because different people may have different responses based on how people consider the question. Besides, the “thick description” of qualitative research can help researchers to collect data correctly and more specifically.

In order to answer the research questions, this study uses existing interviews from the 2015 National Senior Games Daily. The 2015 National Senior Games was held in Minnesota. A total of 12,000 senior athletes participated in the 2015 Games, which attracted the most number of participants so far (NSGA, 2015). Furthermore, the Games hosted in Minnesota were the most thorough in the Senior Games history; it not only concerned the logistics, volunteers, and game village but also concerned the local community, attraction, and local sponsors (NSGA,2015). In addition, the 2015 Games were the first Games that the official media systematically interviewed

the senior athletes, which means the NSGA started to connect the Senior Games' value to the senior athletes. What is more, the NSGA also started to change its position to develop the senior sports. Before the 2015 Senior Games, the NSGA always played a role of event organizer in senior sports; but in the 2015 Games, the NSGA acted more as a server to all senior athletes.

The questions of the 2015 Games' interviews are mainly about the reasons why seniors participate in the Senior Games and how they were feeling about participating in the Senior Games, which fully met the purpose of this study. But the NSGA only interviewed the athletes and posted their answers on the Internet without analyzing the contexts and making conclusions. Hence, the data of the 2015 Games is valuable to be analyzed and evaluated. In this study, the researcher will follow the Gibson and O'Connor's (2003) five steps theory to analyze the data: (1) organizing the data; (2) finding and organizing ideas and concepts; (3) building over-arching themes in the data; (4) ensuring reliability and validity in the data analysis and in the findings; (5) finding possible and plausible explanations of the findings (Gibson & O'Connor, 2003).

A total of 35 senior athletes accepted the interview, and 25 are females, 10 are males. Age range of participants were from 54-96. Even though the data of this research was public on NSGA's official website, all participants were coded (A01, A02, A03... & B01, B02, B03...) to protect their private information.

## **Results**

This study involved a total of 25 female athletes, which were coded as A01, A02, A03...; there are also 10 male athletes, which were coded as B01, B02, B03.... Below are the coded

interviews.

A01

This participant is a Minnesotan, and she originally began to run as she used to be addicted to alcohol. She claimed that participating in sports saved her life, and the motivation for her to join in the games was she wanted her grandson to be proud of her.

A02

This participant is a triathlete and a swimmer. When she was asked about her motivation to play in the games, she said:” It was tons of fun because I’d never done that before. To enjoy life, you need to be ambulatory, and need to move through it.” In addition, this participant also mentioned the importance of the support of family members because she has a good relationship with her grandkids.

A03

This participant suffered from breast cancer many years ago, then she started to do triathlons to overcome obstacles and keep fit.

A04

This participant is also a triathlete, and she comes from Minnesota. She used to swim and run in her spare time until her health club’s instructor found that she has a talent to do both kinds of sports. She did not know what a triathlon even was. Then she was encouraged by her instructor to do a triathlon, and she realized that she was good at it. Hence, she decided to participate in the Senior Games.

A05

This participant is a softball player; she grew up playing ball. But after she married and had her son, she stopped playing ball until at the age of 50. Furthermore, the participant and her teammates come together from different states, but all of them love being together. She said: “I just love softball, and all that goes with it. Good exercise, meeting friends, traveling, it’s a lot of fun.”

A06

This participant claimed that the greatest benefit she received from the Senior Games was fitness. Since she participated in the Games, her back, hip, and knee problems have been improved. In addition, the 2015 Senior Games was her fourth time competing.

A07 & A08

These two participants were siblings that participated in the Senior Games, and both of them started swimming when they were children. They continued their swimming career throughout middle and high schools, and both of them competed at a Division 1 university. After attending the 2013 Senior Games in Cleveland, they decided to come to Minnesota to compete again.

A09

This participant is a runner now, but had no prior experience with running. She suffered from a stroke, and the symptoms affected her muscle coordination. Her husband highlighted how vital walking is to the stroke recovery, then she started walking and slowly run to train her body. After she completed a 5K run, she stated that the 2015 Senior Games was a challenge to her, but she

considered “You have got to have challenges to keep you going.”

A10

This participant recovered from a shoulder surgery. She used to swim when she was younger. The goal for her in this competition was to become a better swimmer, and to break her own records from the 2013 National Senior Games.

A11

This participant is an archery athlete, she learned how to play in the competition in 2013, and she mentioned the Senior Games is like a big family, and provides opportunities for players to stick together.

A12

The 2015 Senior Games is the first time for this participant to travel to Minnesota. The greatest benefit the Senior Games gave to the participant was the camaraderie. She claimed that competing with individuals that were same age as her helped her to keep young.

A13

This participant is a swimmer. She loves swimming and the race was a challenge to her and a surprise as well. During the competition, she was lagged behind for many times, she considered the race was a game that she competed with herself.

A14

This participant is a shuffleboard player, she participated in the Senior Games for her young brother who suffered a painful illness. When her brother said that he wanted to be an Olympic

player, the participant decided to play shuffleboard with her brother.

A15

The motivation of this participant is keeping fit. She mentioned that it keeps her active and young rather than sedentary.

A16

This participant has been playing tennis for exercise since she was a child; unfortunately, there was no women's tennis team in her high school. Even though she insisted on playing tennis in her spare time, she tried to compete in a formal game. When she qualified to attend the Senior Games, she registered every time except the 2013 National Senior Games. She stated that the first orientation of her to participate in the Senior Games was to feel competitive with people at her own age; the second one was to keep running and playing for a long time.

A17

This is the second time for the participant to join in the Senior Games. After she won the gold medal in 2013, she hoped to win it again. As for the changes and benefits for her, she claimed that she got the benefit of both physical fitness and mental health, and she also got the friendship.

A18

This participant is a Minnesotan, and she highlighted that the Senior Games hosted in her home state was a thrill. This was her first Senior Games, but she ensured that she will show up at the next Senior Games.

A19

This participant is a basketball player, and there was no women's basketball when she was younger because the Title IX had not been published yet at that time. She knew the Senior Games by chance, and she decided to enjoy being a powerful person on the courts. This is also not the first Senior Games for the participant. She stated the Senior Games is a lifetime experience, and her motto is "if you do not use it, you will lose it."

A20

This participant was given only 4 months to live several years ago because of cancer. But she did not give up on herself, she tried her best to go through the cancer, and started to prepare for the Senior Games. This is not her first time participating in the Senior Games; the motive for her was to beat the cancer.

A21

This participant raced horses for many years in her early life; after qualifying for the Senior Games, she started her late racing career as a cyclist. This is her seventh Senior Games, and she won a lot of medals in previous competitions. She claimed that "my goal has to be gold."

A22

This participant is a former Olympic bronze medalist. She competed in both long jump and running; although she did not achieve a good result, she said it did not matter. The most significant aspect to her was being able to compete, being active, and meeting other athletes.

A23

This participant is a former racquetball player, and she was selected as a member of

Racquetball Association of Michigan's Hall of Fame. When she underwent six major surgeries from 2012 to 2013, she did not give up on herself. The participant pushed herself to practice and get back to playing racquetball. The reason for this participant to compete in the Senior Games was to enjoy competition.

A24

This participant is a former racquetball player, she stated that her coach made great contributions to her career, not only in the Senior Games but also in her professional career. Even though she does not work with her coach anymore, she still admitted that her coach's advice has lasting influence on her life.

A25

This participant mentioned that the Senior Games are more family oriented, and the people she met here were friendly. She thought the best benefit that she received was camaraderie, and the win or lose is not the most important thing.

B01

This is the fifth Senior Games for this participant, and he has won two gold medals in previous games. The motivation for him to participate in this competition was to get a better result.

B02

This participant was encouraged by his friend to participate in the Senior Games, and he claimed that camaraderie is the most important benefit of the competition. He said: "we are all competing, but we all help each other."

B03

This participant considered that playing the Games could help people to keep healthy and active. Making friends during competition was also an important benefit he received from the Games. In his perspective, the reason for him to participate in the Senior Games was to achieve gold medals, and he did it. He mentioned that he wanted to repeat his achievement in the next Senior Games.

B04

This participant is a triathlete. Although he won a silver medal in the competition, he mentioned that “I do not want to go any faster than anyone, I just want to do better than myself.”

B05

This participant is a triathlete, he started training when he turned 60. The reason for him was to stay in shape and live a long life. From his perspective, support from his daughter is also an important reason for him to join in the competition.

B06

This participant is a softball captain. He holds a sports philosophy: “Competition and fun, that is what it is all about.” In addition, this is his fourth National Senior Games; and his goal for this time was to win a medal. The camaraderie also extended to their spouses.

B07

This participant played tennis since the age of 14, and this is his fifth Senior Games. He stated that he made many great friends from the Senior Games, but he also said that he did not want to

recruit a person that was better than him.

B08 & B09

These two participants are brothers, and they decided to play badminton together when they were children. They will schedule 3-4 badminton games to play per year. However, they did not play as normal players in the Senior Games because they did not have much time to practice; they just enjoy staying with other athletes and making fun jokes.

B10

The 2015 Senior Games was the sixth Senior Games for this participant. He is a baseball player, and found the San Antonio Seniors Softball League. Even though his team has not won a competition yet, he still trying to prove his ability. His goals of this competition were to win a medal and encourage more seniors to participate in games.

#### *Data analysis*

After the process of coding and analyzing, motivations of senior athletes to participate in the Senior Games can be categorized in five main aspects: (a) competitiveness; (b) family & friends; (c) fitness; (d) experience; (e) coach. Meanwhile, benefits of the Senior Games are focusing on camaraderie and health improvement.

Erickson (2015) has identified that competitiveness is not the most important reason for senior athletes to participate in the Senior Games and two participants of his study both agreed their primary motive was making friends. However, in my study, 12 participants said that the primary motive for them was to enjoy competing in games. This result is different from previous

research. What is more, 4 out of the 12 participants reported that the only motivation for them was to win the games. A17 said that “my goal has to be gold.” Besides, this study also found that if a person achieved medals before, the ego to gain more medals would drive the person to pay more attention to competitiveness. A17, B1, and B3’s interview results show that they highlighted previous achievement and hope to get a better result than before.

As this research demonstrated before, family and friends play a significant role in people’s life. Five participants considered family support and company of friends were the most important reasons for them to participate in games. From the results, people who emphasized the significance of family usually had a great relationship with family members. For instance, A2 mentioned that she had a good relationship with her grandkids, and A1 wanted her participation of the Senior Games to make her grandson proud of her.

Previous study emphasized that keeping fit and healthy was the dominant motive for seniors to participate in physical activities. But in this study, approximately half of the participants confirmed that pursuing competitiveness was the primary motive. Only 5 participants said the reason for them to participate in games was keeping active and healthy. Besides, 3 of them suffered from severe illness (e.g. cancer); in order to recovery from illness, doing exercise is an effective way to keep fit and healthy.

This study has also found that experience is very important for senior athletes to participate in games. Experience in this research can be considered in two aspects. Firstly, from the perspective of female athletes, most participants are Baby Boomers; and Baby Boomers grew up before the

implementation of Title IX. So there were few sports opportunities for women offered by schools before that time (Wohlenhaus, 2015). Both A16 and A19 admitted that they had ego to play games when they were young, but there were no games or teams for them to realize their dreams. Hence, when they found the existence of the Senior Games, they registered and competed more than one time.

Secondly, from the standpoint of general athletes, the Senior Games were the special experience for them. A2 claimed that “It was tons of fun because I’d never done that before. To enjoy life, you need to be ambulatory, and need to move through it.” Hence, gaining new experience is also important for senior athletes; and A7 and A8 said that they wanted to participate one more time after finishing their first Senior Games. Besides, more than half of participants (n=13) in this study said that the 2015 National Senior Games was not their first time to participate in the Senior Games.

The last finding of motivations in this study is coach. From the literature review, previous research did not mention the influence from coach. In this study, a total of 6 participants were former athletes; the most obvious difference between professional athletes and general athletes is that professional athletes have been trained systematically. So coaches might produce a lasting influence on athletes’ late career in the Senior Games. A24 stated that her coach made great contributions to her career, not only in the Senior Games but also in her professional career. Even though she does not work with her coach anymore, she still admitted that her coach’s advice has a lasting influence on her life. In addition, A4 said that the reason why she participated in the

Senior Games was her instructor's contribution.

The second purpose of this study was to determine the changes seniors made from being a senior athlete. According to the results of this study, many participants (n=9) claimed that camaraderie was the greatest benefit for them, and they enjoyed meeting new friends and playing with them. For example, B02 said that "we are all competing, but we all help each other." Another benefit the participants received is health improvement. This point is confirmed by previous studies, in which senior athletes stated that activities can reduce the risks of disease and chronic illness (Kim, et al, 2014); and specifically, doing exercise can reduce the risk of heart disease (Mills, 2005) because it can make the muscles of the heart stronger (Chen, 2014).

### **Discussion**

According to Gibson and O'Connor's (2003) five steps theory, this research identifies five findings. However, several limitations still exist in this study. Firstly, the age range of the participants of this study were from 54 to 96, but different ages have different physical and psychological needs (Steverink & Lindenberg, 2006). Their study also proved that older age groups usually suffered more social loss than younger age groups (Steverink & Lindenberg, 2006). Hence, the age range of this study was a little wide to be investigated as one homogenous group. Further research should study the senior athletes in a similar age group to avoid this limitation.

Another limitation in this study is that most participants accepted the interview after finishing the competition immediately; even though they said that they received camaraderie and health

improvement, some lasting benefits might not be captured by this study. The second question of this study might not be fully answered because of the time limitation. Further research could do multiple interviews after competition to find more comprehensive information about Senior Games' benefits.

In addition, this study uses existing data which was collected by the 2015 National Senior Games Daily. Participants might not be 100% honest to answer all the questions; the Daily journalists might also lead interviewees to obtain the answers they would seek. They potentially ignored some answers that were not so popular and only reported mainstream answers. Besides, some interviews only provided several paragraphs or several sentences to answer questions, and there was limited information for me to analyze sufficiently. In the future, researchers can design a systematical questionnaire and interview to investigate more in-depth findings about this topic.

Although only 35 participants were involved in this study, this study can also be generalized to some degree. This study selected both male and female athletes; males always take dominant positions in sports history, and the exploration of female athletes has been rare in sports research. Few previous studies distinguished male and female athletes in senior sports; the third purpose of this study aims to understand the motivation of seniors to participate in games based on sex. Most male and female athletes have similar motivations to join in the Senior Games; however, two females talked about how they could not have opportunities to participate in teams during their school periods, so they wanted to realize their dreams through the Senior Games.

The result reflects the social environment forty years ago. As this paper mentioned previously,

few female Baby Boomers experienced sports in school, and the sports' rules for women were different from men's (Cain, 2001). What is more, women were born to be considered less skilled and competitive than men (Cain, 2001). In addition, most Baby Boomers did not receive the benefit from Title IX. All these "discriminations" led to a situation that women had few opportunities to participate in sports. So the appearance of the Senior Games attracted large numbers of female seniors to get involved. Furthermore, Cardenas, Henderson, and Wilson (2009) found that more females than males participate in group activities, but their research did not explain the reason behind the result. So this investigation can illustrate the story of their generation more completely.

This study also confirms several previous studies. A total of 5 people admitted that family and friends were the main reason to encourage them to play games; 5 other people considered that health is the most concerning reason for them to enjoy sports. Such results proved previous research on motivation to participate in physical activities (Mailot, Hartley & Manh-Cuong, 2014) (Granacher, et al, 2013).

The most important finding of this study is that over half of participants highlighted the importance of competitiveness in the Senior Games. This point proves the success of the Senior Games, because the early Senior Games only aimed to provide a stage for seniors to improve healthy lifestyles (NSGA, 2016); with more and more people attracted to join the event, it becomes more serious activity and more close to general sport competitions.

In addition, a total of 13 people said that the 2015 National Senior Games was not their first

time to participate in the Senior Games, and 18 participants wanted to participate in the next Senior Games. Many of them joined in the Games once again because they had a good experience previously. With the aging process, people might suffer more social loss, not only from self-competence but also social status. How to use their abilities to control their later life is significant to seniors (Bemis, 2016).

A19 confirmed that “if you do not use it, you will lose it.” Dionigi (2006) found that senior athletes would like to use their body ability as much as possible in order to maintain their physical fitness. Hence, when they achieved an encouraging result in a competition, the success will stimulate seniors to participate in the Games again. Furthermore, the success might also recall the youthful self-image and the glories in the past. So the aspiration succeed in the competition could be considered as another potential reason for elder athletes to participate in the Senior Games.

The 2015 National Senior Games was held in Minnesota; only 3 of the participants are Minnesotans, and the rest of them come from all over the United States. A12 stated that the 2015 Senior Games was her first time to visit Minnesota, and she received camaraderie there. The NSGA event brought a huge success for the tourism industry. They not only attracted renowned sponsors like Wilson, but also recruited many local sponsors like Minnesota Timberwolves (NGSA, 2016).

What is more, NSGA also filmed advertising videos to welcome seniors from all over the country. In the registration website, the local attractions, transportation, hotels, and car rentals

were listed to help athletes when they need such information (NSGA, 2016). A18 is a Minnesotan, and the 2015 Senior Games was her first Games. She said that when she knew the Senior Games would host in her home state, she was thrilled and registered immediately. Hence, the host city location itself could be seen as a variable to attract local senior athletes to participate in the Senior Games. Further research could pay more attention on the area of tourism development, which might help NSGA to attract more senior athletes.

Even though NSGA is managing to improve the quality of the National Senior Games, the Games is the most developed competition for seniors in the world. The National Senior Games is also called as Senior Olympics (Parrish-Kell, 2015). Furthermore, the International Senior Games is also hosted by NSGA; athletes from all over the world come to the United States to compete. Investigating American Senior Games could help people from other countries to understand and promote their own Senior Games to improve seniors' later life. Besides, in order to host a successful Senior Games, different countries should change their strategies based on their own culture, education, and social environment.

Under Deng xiaoping's leadership, China's economy has shown substantial development beginning from 1978 (Vogel, 2011). Like the Baby Boomers made huge contributions to build today's America, the 50-70 year-old generation did the greatest progress to boom the development of the new China, which could be seen as the Chinese gold generation. When time goes by, the gold generation will be gradually faded out from the mainstream population (Sportspress, 2014). In China, younger generations feel low responsibilities to take care of older

generations (Russo, 2013), and the stereotype of retired people in China is that they enjoy living with their offspring with many types of sacrifice.

However, when the “One Child” policy was implemented in China in 1980 (Clarke, 2015), people thought that those who only have one child in their family are more educated. So when these people started retiring after 2000, they care more about their health because they do not need to take care of several children, and they are more willing to spend money on health improvement and travelling. The newly retired generation is trying to break through the typical pattern of elder Chinese’ later life. However, the gap of wealth in China is quite large; although elder citizens start improving a healthy lifestyle, how to provide an equal opportunity for Chinese seniors to participate in sports is a complicated question that needs to be solved in consideration of multiple aspects.

In 2009, China hosted the first National Senior Games, and Faqiang Zhang, the president of the Chinese Senior Sport Organization claimed that “Hosting Senior Games must be a tendency incorporate in the development of a society” (Sportspress, 2014, page 1). Furthermore, Chinese government hosts the Chinese National Senior Games by fully considering Chinese sports history; Taiji, martial arts, and table tennis were the big three events in the first Chinese Senior Games (Sportspress, 2014). But there still exists many problems in Chinese Senior Games. For example, Chinese government hosts the Games every four years, but NGSAs hosts it every other year. The American format can provide more opportunities for seniors to participate in sports.

Another issue of the Chinese Senior Games is that competitiveness is considered as an

unimportant element in the game while being regarded as a major factor for participants, and few contact sports are hosted in the Chinese Senior Games. According to this study, competitiveness is the most important reason for seniors to join in sports; researchers who are interested in Chinese Senior Games could use this study's results as a conceptual platform, and consider Chinese's social dynamics and cultures to lead further research.

As this study mentioned before, previous research claimed that doing exercise can reduce heart disease (Mills, 2005) because it can make the muscles of the heart stronger (Chen, 2014). Participants like A9 and A10 joined in the Senior Games because they hoped to recover from surgeries and illness.

Some participants like A3 suffered severe illness (e.g. cancer); when they recover from those critical conditions, seniors become interested in doing exercise. This point illustrates that the preventive exercise in the senior population has not yet fully systematized; many seniors do sports only when they suffer a severe disease. This investigation could help NSGA to develop the Senior Games based on the motivations of senior athletes, and it could also alert seniors to pay more attention to their physical fitness.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the motivations of seniors to participate in the Senior Games. The study adds insightful information to senior sports research. In addition to providing answers to respond to the interview questions, participants were selected from the latest and most organized Senior Games, which generated comprehensive and inclusive information for this study to analyze the

results. In addition, most participants mentioned more than one reason why they participated in the Senior Games; such rich information provided various managerial implications and useful guidelines to conceptualize future inquiries.

The results from this study firstly confirms several previous studies. Family and friends' support is the significant motivation for seniors to participate in competition as long as seniors keep a close relationship with their family members and friends. Living together is not a sufficient solution for family members to take care of seniors but is a connection for seniors to bond with family affections (Beals, 2012). In his study, Frank (2015) stated that elder people will suffer more social losses and more illness, so friendship will take over family care to become the closest affection for seniors in their lives (Russel, 2015).

This study also confirms the importance of physical health for seniors to join in the Senior Games. But keeping physical fitness is not the primary reason for seniors to participate in the Games in this study; only 5 senior athletes mentioned the importance of the physical health concerns, and they also mentioned other aspects of reasons such as competitiveness.

In addition to supporting previous research, this study also found some new reasons for seniors to participate in sports. The most important reason is the appeal of competitiveness; although previous research and NGSAs highlighted the primary purpose of hosting the Senior Games is not for competing but for improving healthy lifestyles (Erickson, 2015), the participants of this study highlighted the importance of competitiveness.

This study is unique because it analyzed the motivations of female athletes and why they

participate in the Senior Games. Their participation illustrated the contribution of Title IX, and also showed the progress of the feminist movement. Coaches' function also plays a significant role in senior athletes who were serious athletes. The Senior Games is a systematic competition; it will attract more former athletes to get involved, so the influence of coaches' behaviors might play a more essential role for senior athletes to play games in their later lives. Some participants also mentioned the motivation for them to join in sports was the previous Senior Games experience, which confirms the success of the Senior Games.

The second purpose of this study was to investigate the benefits that senior athletes received from the Senior Games. Most participants admitted that camaraderie is the greatest reward to them, and this point echoed the motivation (friends) of seniors. Some participants made friends from the Senior Games, and they became lifelong friends to participate in the next Senior Games together. Another benefit the participants received was the improved conditioning. This point is in accordance with previous studies, in which senior athletes stated that activities would likely reduce the risks of disease and chronic illness (Kim, et al, 2014).

In conclusion, even though several limitations exist in this study, it still makes contributions to analyze the motivation of seniors and why they participate in the Senior Games. This study also concludes two main benefits of the Senior Games, so NSGA and senior organizations in other countries can use this study as a reference to investigate further research about this topic and to know more about senior athletes. Improving the Senior Games in the world is a trend in the global sports history; learning more about seniors and caring more about seniors is helpful to

build a more caring and inclusive world.

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