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## Changing identity through sport: The Paralympic sport club experience among adolescents with mobility impairments

Jennifer Piatt <sup>a,\*</sup>, Sangguk Kang <sup>a</sup>, Mary Sara Wells <sup>b</sup>, Shinichi Nagata <sup>a</sup>, Jamie Hoffman <sup>c</sup>, Jennifer Taylor <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Public Health, Indiana University-Bloomington, United States

<sup>b</sup> College of Health, University of Utah-Salt Lake City, United States

<sup>c</sup> College of Health and Human Services, California State University-Sacramento, United States

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Adolescents with mobility impairments have fewer opportunities to challenge identity as an athlete through sport participation.

**Objective/Hypothesis:** This study examined athletic identity impact of adolescent athletes with mobility impairments who participate in Paralympic Sport Clubs.

**Methods:** This cross-sectional web-survey design examined demographics (gender, academic level, hours of time spent in sports participation, and preferred amount of time in sport participation) and athletic identity through the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Forty-seven adolescents (male = 34, female = 13) between the ages of 13–18 with mobility impairments who were currently participating in a Paralympic Sport Club were recruited for the study.

**Results:** Two factorial ANOVA examined the differences of AIMS scores by gender and academic level, and gender and hours of time spent in sports participation per week. Hours of time spent in sports participation by adolescent athletes with physical disabilities showed significant difference on athletes' identity. AIMS score increased along with augmented time spent in sport participation. However, gender and academic level made no significant difference on athletic identity. A one-way ANOVA test was applied to compare the effect of preferred amount of time in sport participation per week on scores for AIMS and showed significant group difference on AIMS. Participants who indicated more preferred amount of time in sport participation also scored higher on AIMS.

**Conclusions:** These findings support the notion that hours of time spent and preferred amount of time in sports participation influences athletic identity. Sport participation, when available can influence athletic identity with this population.

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### Introduction

Prior research has demonstrated that sport participation has various health benefits to individuals with disabilities such as reducing depression, strengthening physical competence, and increasing quality of life.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition, individuals with disabilities, specifically those with mobility impairments, who actively engage in sport participation are more likely to be successful in their vocational work.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, according to Tasiemski, Kennedy,

Gardner, & Blaikley,<sup>4</sup> people with paraplegia and tetraplegia have the opportunity to be more active and experience social reintegration through sport participation. These previous studies demonstrate that sport participation may redefine their identity by providing opportunities to realize their physical competence and abilities that are precursors for social reintegration. Through sports participation, they identify themselves more as an athlete rather than an individual with a disability.

Although previous research has identified various health benefits of sport participation for adolescents with mobility impairments, the general sport participation rate for this population is lower than that of adolescents without disabilities.<sup>5</sup> A variety of studies have shown that people with disabilities have limited opportunities and continue to encounter many barriers for sport

\* Corresponding author. School of Public Health, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1025 E. 7th Street SPH 133, Bloomington, IN 47405, United States.

E-mail address: [jenpiatt@indiana.edu](mailto:jenpiatt@indiana.edu) (J. Piatt).

participation. This includes, but is not limited to the lack of accessible community-based sports facilities and programs and insufficiently skilled staff to facilitate sport.<sup>4,6–9</sup>

Recently however, community-based sports programs with professional staff and well-organized programs, such as the Paralympic Sports Clubs (PSCs), have begun to provide an arena for youth and adults with mobility impairments to compete in sports with peers. Hunter defined PSCs as “community-based programs developed to involve youth and adults with physical and visual disabilities in sports and physical activity, regardless of skill level. All programs and activities will be based in the community and are run by the local organization.”<sup>10(p.26)</sup> Since PSCs provide more opportunities to be engaged in sport activities, sport participation can be a vehicle that strengthens physical function, builds social relationships, and creates positive life-experiences, all of which are important in composing a healthy self-identity for adolescents with disabilities,<sup>11,12</sup> especially those with mobility impairments.

The development of a healthy identity can assist adolescents in forming psychological well-being and higher levels of positive psychosocial adjustment.<sup>13</sup> Stryker and Burke described identity as the “parts of the self-system composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated societies.”<sup>14(p. 284)</sup> One of the meanings often attached to the identity of an individual with a disability is the lack of ability to complete a task. In the case of this population, the adolescent with the mobility impairment often attaches the meaning of being physically unable to participate in an activity, or sport. Since positive identity formation might be particularly important to adolescents with mobility impairments because of limited usage of their physical body functions, adapted sport participation can play an important role in forming positive athletic identity.<sup>15</sup> In addition to changing the identity of physical ability through sport, according to Shapiro and Martin,<sup>16</sup> athletes with mobility impairments with higher self-identity showed closer friendships and lower levels of loneliness demonstrating that multiple new meanings can be assigned through sport. Particularly, the adolescent now sees him or herself as an athlete rather than merely an individual with a disabling condition.

Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder defined athletic identity as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role”<sup>17(p.237)</sup> and asserted that continuous sport participation can play an important role in forming psychosocial adaptations in developmental stages. Although athletic identity has sometimes shown negative effects such as over-commitment on athletic activities and neglecting developing other dimension of self-concepts, athletic identity is positively associated with social and physical well-being.<sup>17–19</sup> Therefore, the positive effects of athletic identity can outweigh its negative effects. Increased athletic identity also can provide growth in confidence with body and sense of control.<sup>20</sup> Since athletic identity is connected to health and fitness benefits through increased sport participation, strong athletic identity can be positively associated with increased commitment to sport participation<sup>17,21</sup> across the lifespan.

One of the most well established measurement scales is the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). The AIMS consists of three domains; social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity.<sup>22</sup> First, social identity is the strength to which athletes identify with the athletic role. Second, exclusivity is the degree to which athletes rely on their athletic role compared to other roles such as friends or occupation. Third, negative affectivity is the degree of negative emotional response resulting from inability to participate in sport due to events such as injury.

AIMS is broadly used not only for the general athletic population but also for athletes with disabilities. For instance, Lantz and Schroeder<sup>23</sup> implemented the AIMS with Midwestern university

students and found that both female and male students expressed athletic identity as positively correlated with masculinity but negatively with femininity. On the other hand, Martin, Mushett, and Smith<sup>24</sup> found both male and female adolescent swimmers with disabilities possess a strong athletic identity, and sport is an important component of their life. Tasiemski et al.<sup>4</sup> used the AIMS in a study with people with SCI and revealed scores varied based on hours of sport participation, gender and sport type. They also found athletic identity had no significant relationship with depression, anxiety, or life satisfaction. In addition, the authors pointed out the difficulty in research with athletic identity since the definition of an “athlete” can vary based on time spent for sport participation and level of achievement.

To date, few studies have attempted to understand the demographic profile of adolescent athletes with mobility impairments and the relationship among gender, academic level, and time spent in adapted sport participation on athletic identity. While there have been an increasing number of studies that examine AIMS with sport participation, it is unclear the relationship AIMS of adolescent athletes with mobility impairments who participate in PSC and demographic variables. Therefore, the actual PSC participation by gender, academic level, and time spent in adapted sport participation by adolescent athletes with mobility impairments should be investigated. This will provide a better understanding of the relationship between adolescent athletes with mobility impairment and athletic identity along with how this athletic identity is related to desired time spent in adapted sports participation.

Thus, there are two purposes of this study. The first is to provide descriptive information on the behaviors and patterns of adapted sport participants including gender, academic level, transportation, and support for participation. The second is to examine the relationship between AIMS and important variables (i.e., gender, grade, time spent in adapted sports participation, preferred amount of time in sports participation). Specifically, this study examines the difference of AIMS scores based on gender and academic level; assesses levels of athletic identity by AIMS, in particular discovering differences in terms of hours of adapted sports participation per week and gender; and determines AIMS score difference by wanted amount of time per week spent in adapted sport participation. Since Tasiemski et al.’s<sup>4</sup> concern was the definition of athlete, this research was conducted with adolescents with mobility impairments who are currently enrolled in PSCs and who are currently participating in at least one sport.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 60 adolescents with mobility impairments (e.g., spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, amputee, etc.) agreed to participate in the study. Thirteen participants did not complete the online survey leaving the total number of research participants at 47. Participants were selected from adolescent athletes with mobility impairments ranging from 13 to 18 years of age and all participants were currently enrolled in a PSC with a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) on staff. All participants had no co-occurring diagnosis of a cognitive impairment and could complete the survey independently.

### Data collection

A cross-sectional study was conducted and data were collected via both paper and web-based surveys. Researchers visited regional adapted sports events for youths and recruited research participants. In addition, participants were recruited through email. First,

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