

Building the Self Through Sport:

A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal and Reciprocal Effects

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Sport and physical activity are widely acknowledged for their physical health benefits, yet their potential to foster long-term psychological well-being remains insufficiently understood. Self-esteem, a core psychological construct closely linked to mental health, well-being, and motivational processes, represents a particularly promising but still underexplored variable that is discussed as both a resource and a potential outcome of sport participation (Dapp, 2018; Fox & Magnus, 2014). Although theoretical models and cross-sectional findings consistently suggest positive associations between sport and self-esteem, systematic evidence on their long-term and reciprocal relations is still lacking (Liu et al., 2015; Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009; Spence et al., 2005). To address this gap, a comprehensive meta-analysis of longitudinal studies is currently being conducted. This meta-analysis synthesizes evidence on reciprocal associations between sport participation and self-esteem across time, allowing conclusions about directionality and cascading developmental effects. Moreover, the meta-analysis covers a broad age range across the lifespan, allowing conclusions about developmental continuity and age-specific effects. Given the conceptual proximity between sport participation and physical self-perceptions, primary attention is directed toward self-evaluations in the physical domain. To reflect the multidimensional nature of self-esteem, however, effects are systematically examined across several additional domains beyond perceived sport competence, including global, social, and academic self-esteem. In addition, potential moderators are investigated to identify conditions under which sport participation is particularly beneficial. These include characteristics of sport involvement (e.g., group versus individual sports, duration and intensity of engagement), as well as demographic factors such as age, gender, and training status. At the time of submission, systematic data screening across seven major databases has begun, with all coding procedures and statistical analyses to be conducted using state-of-the-art meta-analytic methods. Initial results will be presented at the time of the conference. Overall, this meta-analysis advances the understanding of how and under which conditions sport participation contributes to mental health across the lifespan. By identifying key mechanisms and boundary conditions, it provides a strong empirical foundation for the development of evidence-based interventions and optimized real-world sport settings aimed at systematically maximizing the psychological benefits of physical activity across educational, community, and recreational contexts.