



Social Belonging after Transition from Individual to Team-Based Recreational Sport

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Abstract: Transitioning from an individual sport environment to a team-based recreational sport represents a meaningful change in the social organization of physical activity. Individuals accustomed to controlling their own pace, routines, goals, and participation decisions may encounter new expectations involving communication, coordination, shared responsibility, interpersonal familiarity, and collective identity when entering a team environment. Although recreational team sport is generally less performance-oriented than elite competition, the transition can nevertheless involve substantial social adjustment because participation increasingly occurs within a network of interpersonal relationships. This paper examines the conceptual relationship between transition from individual to team-based recreational sport and subsequent social belonging. The analysis integrates social identity theory, self-determination theory, group cohesion perspectives, social support research, exercise identity research, and literature concerning participation in organized sport and exercise. Particular attention is given to the processes through which repeated interaction, perceived similarity, peer support, team identification, inclusion, and shared activity may contribute to a developing sense of belonging. Previous research has shown that social identity is relevant to physical activity behaviour and that identification with exercise groups can be associated with participation and positive exercise experiences. Stevens et al. reported that social identification within an exercise context was associated with objectively assessed participation, exercise-specific satisfaction, group cohesion, and life satisfaction among parkrun participants. Research involving group exercise has also identified relationships between group membership, multiple forms of social support, exercise identity, and physical activity. Longitudinal evidence further indicates that social support from friends can be

relevant to physical activity during university, while group-exercise research has linked group identification with subsequent attendance. Because no original participant dataset was supplied for the present manuscript, all numerical values in the Results section are explicitly simulated and are not empirical observations. The illustrative analysis presents social-belonging scores of 2.84 at individual-sport baseline, 3.58 during an early team transition, and 4.31 after established team participation. A second illustrative analysis presents simulated contribution indicators of 49% for team identification, 44% for peer support, and 38% for interaction frequency. These values are not causal effects, regression coefficients, population estimates, or experimentally observed outcomes. The conceptual analysis proposes that social belonging may increase as individuals acquire repeated opportunities to interact, receive peer support, develop team identification, and experience recognition as legitimate members of the recreational group. Nevertheless, the transition is unlikely to be uniformly positive. Individuals may experience uncertainty, role ambiguity, differences in social confidence, concerns about group norms, or difficulty integrating into an already established team. The paper therefore conceptualizes social belonging as a developmental process rather than an automatic consequence of joining a team. Future empirical studies should use longitudinal designs to compare participants before, during, and after transition, distinguish social belonging from group cohesion and exercise identity, and combine self-report measures with attendance and social-network data.

Keywords: Social Belonging; Recreational Sport; Team-Based Sport; Individual Sport; Sport Transition; Social Identity; Group Identification; Peer Support; Team Cohesion; Social Connectedness

1. Introduction

Background

Participation in recreational sport is not limited to physical movement or exercise behaviour. It can also become an important social experience through which individuals form relationships, develop a sense of group membership, establish routines, and attach personal meaning to their participation. This social dimension becomes particularly important when a person moves from an individual sport into a team-based recreational setting. Individual sports often allow participants considerable control over their pace, schedule, preparation, goals, and participation decisions. Team-based recreational sport, by contrast, introduces a

more socially coordinated structure in which members may need to communicate, share responsibilities, adjust to collective routines, and cooperate with others.

Moving between these two environments therefore involves more than adapting to a different activity or learning new physical skills. It may also require a change in how individuals understand their place within the sporting environment. Someone who previously experienced sport largely as a personal pursuit may need to become familiar with teammates, learn informal expectations, understand how communication takes place within the group, and determine whether the new social environment feels compatible with their preferences and values. These experiences are closely connected with social belonging, which refers to the feeling of being accepted, included, connected, and recognized as a legitimate member of a group.

Social identity theory provides a useful basis for explaining this transition. Stevens et al. proposed that social identity is relevant to physical activity because membership in exercise and sport groups can become incorporated into an individual's sense of self and subsequently influence behaviour. In recreational sport, identifying with a team may therefore involve more than simply knowing that one belongs to a particular group. Over time, participation may contribute to a shared sense of “we,” in which the team becomes psychologically meaningful to the individual.

Empirical research supports the importance of this process. Stevens et al., in research involving parkrun participants, found that stronger social identification was associated with greater objectively measured participation, higher exercise-specific satisfaction, stronger group cohesion, and greater life satisfaction. These findings suggest that social identification can influence both behavioural participation and the quality of an individual's experience within an organized physical-activity setting.

Evidence from group-exercise research points in a similar direction. Golaszewski et al. reported that membership in group exercise settings was associated with several forms of social support and that a number of these supportive experiences were related to exercise identity. Such findings are relevant to the transition from individual to team-based recreational sport because they indicate that interpersonal relationships can become part of the way individuals understand and sustain their involvement in physical activity.

The transition, however, is not necessarily comfortable from the beginning. Individuals who are accustomed to exercising independently may initially feel uncertain about group expectations or social interaction. They may require time to become familiar with teammates,

understand informal norms, develop relationships, and determine whether they feel genuinely accepted within the group. For this reason, social belonging is likely to be especially important during the early stages of the transition.

Problem Statement

Although social identity, group cohesion, social support, and exercise participation have received considerable attention in sport and exercise research, the process through which social belonging develops after a person moves from individual sport into team-based recreational sport remains less clearly understood. Much of the existing literature focuses on individuals who are already established members of exercise groups or sport teams. As a result, the psychological adjustment involved in moving from a largely self-directed activity environment into a more socially interdependent setting may receive insufficient attention.

This transition is important because it changes the social structure of participation. In an individual sport, relationships with coaches, peers, or training partners may be valuable, but they are not always essential to the performance of the activity itself. Team-based recreational sport places interaction closer to the centre of participation. Members share space, communicate, coordinate activities, negotiate responsibilities, and operate within a recognizable collective. A newcomer may therefore need to develop new interpersonal expectations and social skills before feeling fully comfortable within the team.

A further issue concerns the distinction between social belonging and related psychological constructs. Social belonging refers specifically to the experience of being accepted, connected, and included within a group. Group cohesion concerns the forces that help maintain the group as a functioning unit. Social identity concerns the extent to which group membership becomes part of the self-concept, while social support refers to assistance, encouragement, or resources received or perceived from others. These constructs are related, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. Christensen et al., for example, showed that group cohesion and social support can develop within exercise classes, while also demonstrating that group formation is shaped by factors such as social composition, instructor characteristics, and the nature of the activity.

The timing of social belonging is another important issue. A participant may feel little connection immediately after joining a team but gradually develop stronger relationships through repeated interaction. In other cases, initial enthusiasm may weaken if the person encounters exclusion, interpersonal tension, unclear social expectations, or group norms that

feel incompatible. A single cross-sectional assessment therefore provides only a limited view of how belonging develops or changes over time.

The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore:

How may social belonging develop when individuals transition from individual sport participation to team-based recreational sport, and which social and psychological processes may support or constrain this transition?

Research Motivation

The motivation for examining this issue begins with the recognition that recreational sport participation often changes over time. Individuals may move from one activity to another because of changing interests, new social opportunities, access to facilities, scheduling demands, or a desire to participate with other people. When this change involves moving from an individual sport into a team setting, the participant is not only changing the activity but also entering a different social structure. Understanding how belonging develops during this period can therefore contribute to a more complete account of recreational sport participation.

Participation continuity provides a second important motivation. When individuals develop a strong sense of belonging within a team, the social value of participation may become an additional reason for continued involvement. Attendance may no longer depend only on enjoyment of the activity itself, because relationships, shared routines, and group membership can also become meaningful. Conversely, weak belonging may make continued participation less attractive even when the individual remains interested in the sport.

A third motivation concerns theoretical integration. Social identity theory explains how membership in a group may become part of an individual's self-concept, while self-determination theory emphasizes relatedness as a fundamental psychological need. Group-cohesion and social-support perspectives further explain how interpersonal connection, assistance, and collective functioning can influence experiences within sport. Bringing these perspectives together provides a stronger basis for understanding how social belonging may emerge during a change in participation context.

The topic also has clear practical relevance. Recreational sport organizations regularly introduce new participants into teams that may already have established routines, friendships, and informal norms. A better understanding of the social adjustment involved in this process may help coaches, organizers, and team leaders create environments in which newcomers are

able to develop meaningful connections without facing unnecessary social or competitive pressure. Such knowledge may contribute to more inclusive recreational sport settings and improve the likelihood that new participants remain engaged over time.

6. Literature Review

Social Belonging and Group Membership

Social belonging refers to the extent to which individuals feel accepted, valued, included, and connected within a social environment. The need to belong has long been recognized as a fundamental human motivation because people generally seek stable and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Baumeister and Leary's account is particularly influential in this regard, as it places interpersonal attachment among basic psychological needs rather than treating it as a secondary social preference.

Within sport and physical activity settings, belonging can develop through repeated participation in environments where individuals encounter familiar people and share common interests. Regular interaction provides opportunities for participants to recognize one another, develop interpersonal familiarity, and establish expectations about future interaction. Over time, these repeated encounters may transform a collection of individuals into a group that carries psychological meaning for its members.

Social identity theory adds an important perspective to this process. When membership in a group becomes part of an individual's self-definition, participation may acquire personal significance beyond the activity itself. Stevens et al. argued that social identity can influence physical activity because people may internalize membership in exercise groups and sport communities as part of how they understand themselves. This perspective is especially relevant to individuals moving into team-based recreational sport, because the transition may involve not only joining a new activity but also developing a new sense of social identity.

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Transition from Individual to Team-Based Sport

Moving from an individual sport into a team-based recreational environment can change how participants experience autonomy, responsibility, communication, and social interaction. Individual participation often allows greater personal control over pace, goals, preparation, and decision-making, whereas team-based participation requires a greater degree of coordination with others.

This does not mean that individual sports are necessarily socially isolated. Participants may train with coaches, partners, clubs, or informal communities. The difference lies mainly in the structure of participation. In many individual sports, successful involvement does not require continuous coordination with teammates, while team-based recreational sport generally places interpersonal interaction much closer to the centre of the activity.

A newcomer must therefore learn both the sport itself and the social environment surrounding it. This may include understanding how decisions are made, how responsibilities are distributed, how communication occurs, and how informal relationships influence participation. The quality of this adjustment can shape the development of belonging. Some participants may establish connections quickly, whereas others may experience uncertainty while learning the expectations of the group.

For this reason, an important distinction exists between joining a team and feeling that one belongs to the team. Formal membership may occur immediately, while psychological belonging may require a longer period of interaction, recognition, and social adjustment. Pasted markdown

Social Identity and Recreational Sport

Social identity research provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding why team membership may influence recreational sport participation. Group identification can shape behaviour when membership becomes psychologically meaningful and participants begin to view themselves as part of a collective rather than only as independent individuals.

Stevens et al. proposed that social identity can influence physical activity engagement and may also support effective group functioning and leadership within exercise contexts. Empirical evidence further supports this position. Research involving parkrun participants found that stronger social identification was associated with greater participation and more positive exercise experiences, including exercise-specific satisfaction and stronger group cohesion.

Repeated-attendance research also suggests that identification may influence continued participation. Studies involving exercise classes have shown that participants who identify more strongly with a particular class are more likely to return to the same class in the future. These findings indicate that social identification may influence not only how individuals feel about a group but also whether they continue to participate in it. Pasted markdown

Social Support and Recreational Participation

Social support may serve as an important mechanism linking group membership with social belonging. Support can take several forms, including emotional encouragement, validation, companionship, practical assistance, and information.

Golaszewski et al. found that membership in group exercise settings was associated with several forms of social support and that some of these supportive experiences were also related to exercise identity. This is particularly relevant to newcomers entering recreational teams because they may initially lack established relationships within the group.

Peer support can reduce this social distance. Teammates may explain routines, provide information about schedules, introduce newcomers to other members, offer encouragement, or help them understand informal expectations. These behaviours do more than provide practical assistance; they can communicate acceptance and signal that existing members are willing to invest effort in the newcomer's participation.

Repeated supportive interaction may therefore strengthen belonging by making the newcomer feel increasingly recognized and valued within the group. Pasted markdown

Group Cohesion and Belonging

Group cohesion and social belonging are related but conceptually distinct. Cohesion generally refers to the forces that help maintain a group and support collective functioning, whereas belonging concerns an individual's subjective sense of being accepted and connected within that group.

This distinction is important because a team can be highly cohesive while still being difficult for a newcomer to enter. Strong relationships among existing members may improve group functioning, but they can also make social integration harder if newcomers perceive the group as closed or difficult to approach.

Christensen et al. demonstrated that cohesion and social support within exercise classes can be influenced by factors such as group composition, instructor ability, and characteristics of the activity. Their findings highlight that belonging cannot be explained solely by personal characteristics. The broader social climate and structure of the group also shape whether members experience acceptance and connection. Pasted markdown

Relatedness and Self-Determination

Self-determination theory offers another useful explanation for why team-based recreational sport may influence belonging. The theory identifies relatedness as one of three basic

psychological needs, alongside autonomy and competence. Relatedness refers to the experience of meaningful connection with others.

Team-based recreational sport can provide opportunities to satisfy this need through shared activity, mutual encouragement, interpersonal interaction, and participation within a recognizable group. Research by Edmunds, Ntoumanis, and Duda has supported the relevance of self-determination theory in exercise contexts, particularly the relationship between psychological need satisfaction and motivation.

The transition from individual to team-based sport may therefore alter the balance among psychological needs. Some participants may experience stronger relatedness because of increased social contact, while others may initially perceive reduced autonomy because their participation becomes more closely coordinated with teammates. Whether the transition is experienced positively may depend on whether the group climate is supportive rather than controlling. Pasted markdown

Peer Similarity and Group Identification

Perceived similarity may also influence how easily individuals develop a sense of belonging. Participants may feel more comfortable when they believe that other members share similar interests, goals, attitudes, communication styles, or recreational priorities.

However, similarity should not be treated as a necessary condition for belonging. Teams composed of diverse members can still develop strong social connection when group norms emphasize inclusion, respect, and mutual recognition.

Exercise-class research has shown that perceived similarity among members can predict stronger social identification and that stronger identification can, in turn, predict subsequent attendance. This suggests that perceived compatibility may help participants interpret the group as socially meaningful.

For people transitioning from individual sport into an established team, this process may be especially important because they are entering a social environment with existing norms and relationships. Perceived compatibility may therefore influence how quickly they develop confidence and connection within the team. Pasted markdown

Leadership and Belonging

Although peer relationships are central to the present framework, leadership can also influence belonging indirectly. Leaders help shape the social climate by communicating norms, structuring interaction, and influencing how group membership is understood.

Research by Stevens et al. found that perceptions of identity leadership were associated with stronger group identification, which was subsequently linked with attendance. Steffens et al. similarly reported that identity-focused leadership within exercise classes was related to group identification and comfort, and that these experiences were connected with attendance and effort.

These findings suggest that leaders can influence the extent to which members perceive the group as inclusive and psychologically meaningful. For newcomers, inclusive leadership may be particularly valuable because it can reduce uncertainty about whether they are accepted as legitimate members of the team. Pasted markdown

Social Interaction and Participation Continuity

Repeated social interaction can gradually create familiarity, and familiarity can reduce uncertainty within interpersonal relationships. When participants encounter the same teammates regularly, they gain more opportunities to communicate, observe one another, exchange support, and develop expectations about future interactions.

Scarapicchia et al.'s longitudinal research with university students showed that support from friends was relevant to physical activity over time. Although university transition differs from recreational sport transition, the findings support the broader proposition that social relationships can contribute to continued participation.

For individuals entering team-based recreational sport, repeated interaction may therefore help transform initial attendance into a socially embedded routine. Over time, participants may become known by others, communicate more comfortably with teammates, and begin to anticipate interaction with familiar people. At this stage, the activity may no longer function only as a form of physical participation; it may also become part of the individual's social life. Pasted markdown

2. Research Gap

Existing literature has established important links among social identity, social support, group cohesion, exercise identity, and participation in physical activity. Research conducted in group-exercise settings indicates that group membership can provide several forms of social support and may also contribute to the development of exercise identity. Other studies have shown that stronger social identification within exercise groups can be associated with subsequent attendance and continued participation.

Despite these findings, much of the existing evidence focuses on people who are already established within group-based exercise or sport environments. Comparatively less attention has been given to the transition itself, particularly the movement from an individually organized sport setting into a team-based recreational context. This transition represents an important psychological and social shift because participants move from a relatively self-directed form of participation toward one that involves greater interpersonal interaction, shared routines, and social interdependence.

A second gap concerns the distinction between social belonging and social identity. Although these constructs are closely related, they describe different psychological experiences. A participant may strongly identify with a team and regard membership as part of their self-concept while still feeling uncertain about whether they are personally accepted by other members. Conversely, an individual may feel welcomed and socially comfortable within a team without yet viewing that team as an important part of their identity. Treating these constructs as interchangeable may therefore obscure meaningful differences in the adjustment process.

A third gap relates to the development of belonging over time. Social belonging is unlikely to emerge immediately after team entry. Instead, it may strengthen gradually as participants become familiar with teammates, learn group routines, and accumulate shared experiences. A single assessment conducted shortly after transition cannot adequately capture these changes or distinguish temporary uncertainty from more persistent difficulties in social integration.

Peer support represents another area requiring greater attention. Although social support has been widely recognized as important for physical activity and group participation, less is known about the specific behaviours through which teammates help newcomers become integrated into recreational sport environments. Informational assistance, encouragement, inclusion in informal interaction, practical guidance, and recognition may each contribute differently to the development of belonging.

A further gap concerns the difference between behavioural participation and psychological integration. Attendance at team activities demonstrates that a person is participating, but it does not necessarily indicate that the individual feels connected, accepted, or socially embedded within the group. A participant may continue attending while feeling peripheral, whereas another may quickly establish strong interpersonal connections. Behavioural retention and psychological belonging should therefore be examined as related but distinct outcomes.

The central research gap can consequently be stated as follows:

A longitudinal, transition-focused framework is needed to explain how social belonging develops when individuals move from individual sport participation into team-based recreational sport, and how peer interaction, social support, team identification, repeated participation, and recognition contribute to that process.

3. Novelty / Proposed Contribution

The principal contribution of this paper is the development of a transition-oriented framework that links a change in the social structure of sport participation with the gradual development of social belonging. Rather than treating team membership as immediate evidence of belonging, the framework proposes that belonging emerges through a sequence of social experiences that occur after entry into the team.

The proposed process is:

Individual Sport Participation → Team Entry → Social Interaction → Peer Support → Team Identification → Social Belonging → Continued Team Participation

This framework does not assume that moving into a team environment automatically improves social belonging. Team entry creates new opportunities for interaction, but the psychological outcome depends on how participants experience those interactions and whether they perceive the group as supportive, inclusive, and socially meaningful.

One proposed mechanism is social exposure. Regular contact allows participants to become familiar with teammates, communication styles, routines, and group expectations. Familiarity can reduce uncertainty and make interaction progressively more comfortable.

A second mechanism is peer support. Supportive behaviours from teammates can communicate acceptance and signal that the newcomer is valued within the group. Such support may include encouragement, practical guidance, information, companionship, or assistance in understanding informal team practices.

The third mechanism is team identification. As participation becomes more regular, individuals may begin to view the team as psychologically meaningful and incorporate membership into their sense of self. This process can strengthen the perceived significance of participation beyond the activity itself.

A fourth mechanism is shared participation. Common experiences, repeated activities, and collective routines can create a history of interaction that strengthens social connection. These experiences provide a context in which relationships can develop naturally over time.

The fifth mechanism is recognition. When established members acknowledge a newcomer as a legitimate participant, uncertainty about group membership may decrease. Recognition can therefore contribute to the transition from simply attending a team activity to feeling genuinely included within the group.

The proposed framework is novel because it conceptualizes belonging as an evolving process of social integration rather than an automatic outcome of joining a recreational team. It also distinguishes psychological belonging from attendance, cohesion, identity, and general social support, allowing these processes to be examined separately in future empirical research.

4. Research Objectives / Research Questions

The primary objective of this paper is to examine how social belonging may develop when individuals transition from individual sport participation to team-based recreational sport. The transition is treated as a developmental process in which participants enter a new social environment and gradually adjust to different forms of interaction, coordination, and group membership.

The study also considers several mechanisms that may influence this process, including peer support, team identification, interaction frequency, perceived compatibility, recognition, and repeated participation. Particular attention is given to distinguishing social belonging from related constructs so that future empirical studies can examine the transition with greater conceptual precision.

Research Objectives

- To examine how the transition from individual sport to team-based recreational sport may influence the development of social belonging.
- To distinguish social belonging from group cohesion, social identity, social support, and exercise identity.
- To investigate peer support as a possible mechanism through which newcomers become socially integrated into recreational teams.
- To examine team identification as a psychological pathway that may strengthen social belonging over time.
- To evaluate repeated interpersonal interaction as a mechanism through which familiarity, recognition, and social connection may develop.
- To examine the potential role of perceived compatibility in newcomer adjustment and team integration.

- To identify social and contextual barriers that may limit the development of belonging after team entry.
- To develop a longitudinal conceptual framework that can guide future empirical research on recreational sport transitions.

Research Questions

1. How might social belonging change as individuals move from individual sport participation into team-based recreational sport?
2. Which forms of peer interaction are most likely to support the development of belonging?
3. How does team identification contribute to social belonging during the transition period?
4. To what extent may perceived peer support influence social adjustment after team entry?
5. How does repeated interpersonal interaction contribute to familiarity and social integration?
6. Does perceived compatibility with teammates influence the development of belonging?
7. How might team leadership shape the social integration of newcomers?
8. Which interpersonal or contextual factors may prevent participants from developing a strong sense of belonging?
9. How is social belonging related to continued participation in team-based recreational sport?

5. Methodology

Research Design

This manuscript adopts a simulation-based conceptual research design rather than reporting a completed empirical study. The design brings together social identity theory, self-determination theory, social-support perspectives, group-cohesion research, exercise-identity research, and evidence concerning social identification and participation in organized physical-activity settings. The central conceptual predictor is the transition from individual sport participation to team-based recreational sport, while social belonging is treated as the principal outcome. Peer support, team identification, interaction frequency, and perceived compatibility are examined as possible mechanisms through which this transition may influence the development of belonging.

A longitudinal orientation is appropriate because social belonging is unlikely to remain stable throughout the transition period. A participant may feel uncertain immediately after joining a

team but develop stronger connections after repeated interaction over several weeks or months. For this reason, the proposed framework emphasizes repeated assessment rather than a single post-transition measurement. Longitudinal approaches are better suited to examining how social relationships, group identification, and continued participation develop over time.

Dataset / Sample

No original participant-level dataset was collected for this manuscript. Any quantitative values presented elsewhere in the paper are therefore illustrative and should not be interpreted as observations from actual participants.

A future empirical study should recruit adults who are actively moving from an individual recreational sport into a team-based recreational sport. Ideally, participants should be assessed before entering the team, during the early adjustment period, and again after sufficient time has passed for meaningful social relationships to develop.

The sample should include individuals with different levels of previous sport experience and different durations of involvement in individual activities. Such variation would allow researchers to examine whether long-term experience with independent participation influences later adjustment to a team setting. It would also be useful to distinguish between participants entering newly formed teams and those joining established teams, because the social demands of these two environments may differ substantially. New teams develop relationships collectively, whereas newcomers entering established teams may need to integrate into pre-existing social networks.

Tools / Techniques

Social belonging should serve as the primary psychological construct. Measurement should assess whether participants feel accepted, included, valued, connected, and comfortable within the recreational team. These dimensions are important because formal membership alone does not establish whether a participant experiences genuine social integration.

Team identification should measure the extent to which participants view the team as an important part of their social identity. Peer support should capture emotional encouragement, informational assistance, validation, companionship, and practical help received from teammates. Interaction frequency should reflect how often participants communicate and engage with other team members, while perceived compatibility should assess whether participants view teammates as socially compatible in terms of interests, attitudes, communication styles, and recreational goals.

Behavioural participation should be examined separately from psychological belonging. Where available, attendance records should be used to provide an objective indication of participation. This distinction is important because an individual may attend regularly without feeling socially connected, while another participant may feel strong belonging despite occasional attendance barriers.

Experimental Procedure

The present manuscript does not report an experiment involving human participants. A future empirical investigation could use a longitudinal design beginning while participants are still involved primarily in an individual sport.

At baseline, participants could complete measures of social expectations, previous experience with group sport, perceived autonomy, exercise identity, and expectations concerning team membership. After entering the recreational team, brief follow-up assessments could be administered at predetermined intervals to capture changes in social experience during the adjustment period.

During the early stages of transition, participants could report the frequency and quality of peer interaction, perceived inclusion, support received, and comfort within the team. Researchers could simultaneously monitor attendance and continuity of participation. After several weeks, participants could complete more detailed measures of social belonging, team identification, peer support, perceived compatibility, and integration into the group.

A later follow-up would make it possible to determine whether early experiences of belonging are associated with continued participation. This design would also help distinguish temporary adjustment difficulties from more persistent problems in social integration.

Evaluation Metrics

The primary evaluation metric should be the social belonging score, reflecting perceived acceptance, inclusion, connection, and recognition within the team.

Secondary psychological measures should include team identification, perceived peer support, social comfort, perceived inclusion, perceived compatibility, and exercise identity. Behavioural indicators should include attendance frequency, participation consistency, membership duration, and continuation following the transition. Relational measures could also be included, such as the number of teammates identified as trusted partners, preferred interaction partners, or sources of support.

For longitudinal analysis, mixed-effects models would be appropriate for examining within-person changes in belonging while accounting for variation between teams. Mediation analysis could be used to test whether peer support or team identification helps explain changes in belonging across time. Social-network analysis could further examine whether increased belonging develops alongside expansion of interpersonal connections within the team.

Together, these measures would provide a more complete assessment of the transition by combining psychological experience, behavioural participation, and interpersonal relationship development rather than relying on a single indicator.

6. Results

Table 1. Illustrative Social Belonging across the Transition to Team-Based Recreational Sport

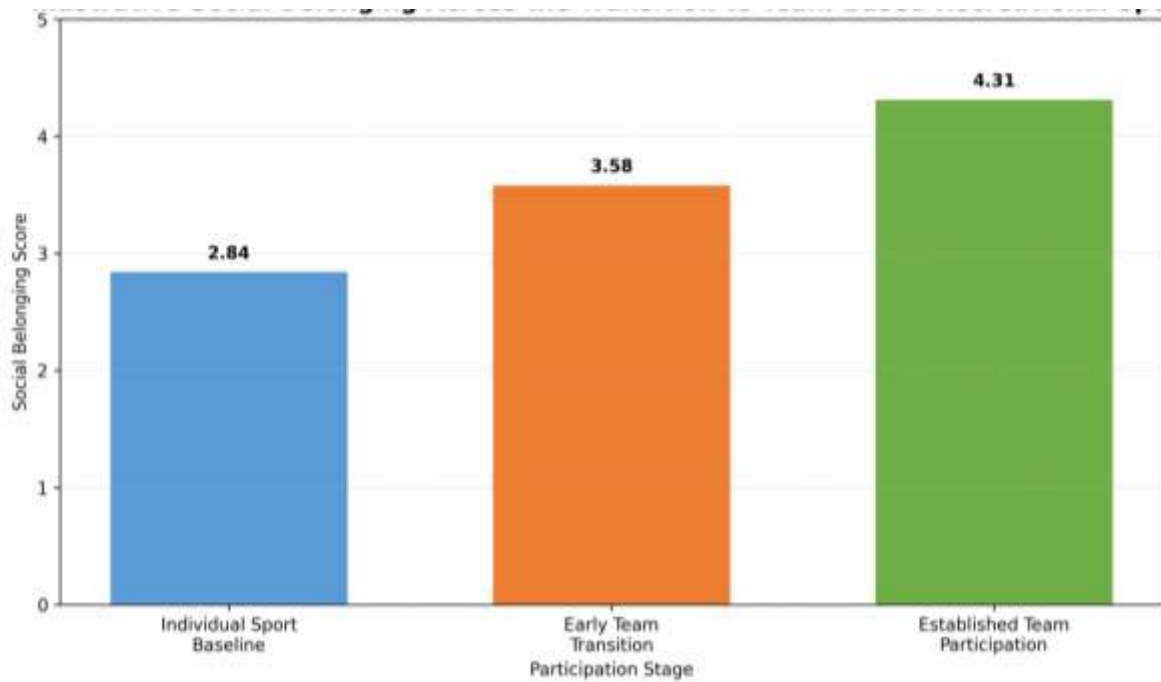
Participation Stage	Illustrative Social Belonging Score
Individual Sport Baseline	2.84
Early Team Transition	3.58
Established Team Participation	4.31

Note: All values are simulated for conceptual and methodological illustration.

The illustrative pattern shows a gradual increase in social belonging across the three stages of transition. The score rises from 2.84 during individual-sport participation to 3.58 during the early stage of team entry and reaches 4.31 after team participation becomes more established. Conceptually, this pattern represents the possibility that belonging may strengthen as participants gain repeated opportunities to interact with teammates, become familiar with group routines, receive social support, and develop a stronger sense of membership. Because the values are simulated, however, the observed progression should not be treated as evidence that team participation necessarily produces higher social belonging.

Graph 1. Illustrative Social Belonging across the Transition to Team-Based Recreational Sport

The graph presents the same simulated pattern visually, showing progressively higher social-belonging scores from individual-sport baseline through early team transition to established team participation.



Source/Note: Author-generated illustration based on simulated values; no empirical participant data were used.

Interpretation: The upward pattern illustrates the proposed developmental nature of social belonging. Rather than assuming that belonging occurs immediately after joining a team, the conceptual model suggests that it may strengthen gradually as interpersonal familiarity, peer interaction, and recognition within the group develop over time.

The graph visually presents the simulated progression in social belonging across the three participation stages. Because the values are illustrative, they should not be interpreted as empirical findings or evidence of a statistically established relationship.

Table 2. Illustrative Social-Psychological Factors Associated with Social Belonging

Social-Psychological Factor	Simulated Contribution (%)
Team Identification	49
Peer Support	44
Interaction Frequency	38

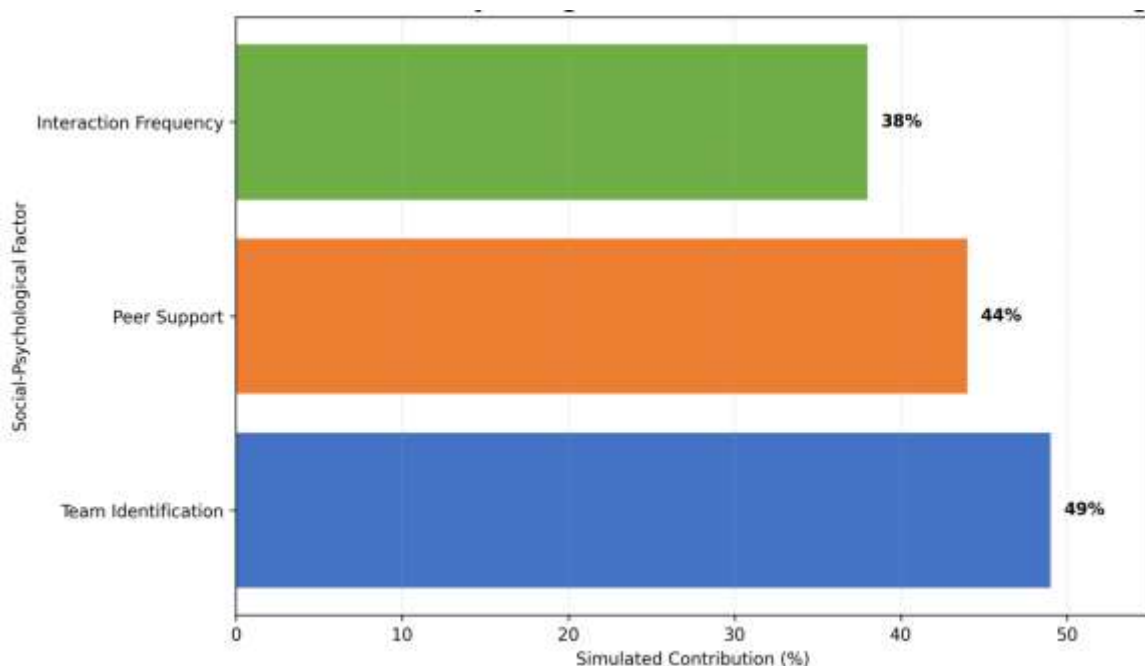
Note: The values are independent simulated indicators developed for conceptual illustration. They do not represent regression coefficients, effect sizes, explained variance, causal contributions, or component percentages that are required to sum to 100%.

The illustrative values assign the highest relative indicator to team identification (49%), followed by peer support (44%) and interaction frequency (38%). Conceptually, this pattern suggests that identifying with the team may play an especially important role in the development of social belonging, while supportive relationships and repeated interpersonal contact may provide additional pathways through which newcomers become socially integrated.

These values should not be interpreted as evidence that team identification is empirically more influential than peer support or interaction frequency. Their purpose is to demonstrate how the proposed conceptual relationships could be presented and subsequently tested in a future empirical investigation.

Graph 2. Illustrative Social-Psychological Factors Associated with Social Belonging

The graph compares the simulated relative indicators assigned to team identification, peer support, and interaction frequency. Team identification has the highest illustrative value, followed by peer support and interaction frequency.



Source/Note: Author-generated illustration based entirely on simulated values; no empirical participant data were used.

Interpretation: The pattern represents the proposed idea that belonging may develop through several interconnected social processes rather than through team membership alone. Identification with the group may contribute to a stronger sense of membership, peer support

may communicate acceptance and interpersonal value, and repeated interaction may create the familiarity needed for social relationships to develop.

The graph presents the simulated relative values assigned to team identification, peer support, and interaction frequency.

Statistical / Experimental Findings

No inferential statistical analysis is reported because the manuscript does not include an empirical participant dataset. The numerical results are therefore presented only as simulated illustrations of the proposed conceptual pattern.

The illustrative social-belonging score increases from 2.84 at the individual-sport baseline to 3.58 during the early team-transition stage and reaches 4.31 after team participation becomes more established. The difference between the baseline and established-team conditions is 1.47 points.

A second simulated analysis assigns illustrative values of 49% to team identification, 44% to peer support, and 38% to interaction frequency. These values are intended solely to demonstrate how the proposed relationships might be presented in a future empirical study. They should not be interpreted as effect sizes, regression coefficients, causal estimates, explained variance, or population-level parameters.

7. Discussion / Critical Discussion

Results Interpretation

The simulated pattern illustrates the possibility that social belonging may strengthen gradually as individuals move from an individual sport setting into team-based recreational sport. The increase from 2.84 at baseline to 3.58 during early team entry and 4.31 after established participation represents a conceptual progression rather than an observed empirical effect. The pattern is consistent with the idea that belonging may emerge through repeated social experience rather than appearing immediately when a person joins a team.

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One possible explanation is increasing interpersonal familiarity. Individual sport participation may offer fewer opportunities for sustained interaction with a stable group of peers, whereas team-based participation creates recurring contact with the same people. Through repeated encounters, participants can become familiar with teammates' communication styles, preferences, strengths, routines, and behavioural expectations. As this familiarity develops,

interpersonal uncertainty may decrease and the team environment may become more predictable and socially comfortable.

A second mechanism may involve team identification. Social identity perspectives suggest that group membership can become incorporated into self-concept and influence behaviour. Repeated participation may therefore allow individuals to move from seeing the team as an external group to viewing it as part of their own social identity. This process may strengthen belonging because the participant increasingly experiences the group as personally meaningful rather than simply as a setting in which physical activity occurs.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The proposed pattern is broadly consistent with previous research linking social identification with physical-activity participation and positive exercise experiences. Stevens, Rees, and Polman reported that stronger identification among parkrun participants was associated with greater participation, higher exercise-specific satisfaction, stronger cohesion, and better life satisfaction. Although parkrun differs from team-based recreational sport, the findings support the wider proposition that identification with a physical-activity group can influence both behaviour and subjective experience. Pasted text

Research on repeated exercise-class attendance provides a further point of comparison. Studies have shown that stronger identification with a particular exercise class can be associated with greater likelihood of returning to that class. Perceived similarity among class members has also been linked with stronger identification. These findings suggest that social experiences within a group may influence participation continuity, although the present paper focuses specifically on the transition between individual and team-based participation structures.

Social-support research provides additional support for the proposed framework. Golaszewski et al. found that group-exercise membership was associated with several forms of support, including emotional, validation, informational, instrumental, and companionship support. Some of these forms were also related to exercise identity. The present framework extends this perspective by suggesting that such support may be especially important during the early period when newcomers are attempting to establish a place within an unfamiliar team.

Longitudinal evidence from university populations also indicates that support from friends can influence physical activity over time. Although university transition and sport transition

are different contexts, both involve changes in social environment and illustrate how interpersonal relationships may affect ongoing participation. Pasted text

Why Results May Differ

Future empirical findings may differ substantially from the simulated pattern because adjustment to team-based recreational sport is unlikely to occur in the same way for all participants. Previous team experience may be important. Individuals who have participated in teams before may already understand common communication practices, shared responsibilities, and group norms, allowing them to adjust more quickly than those entering team sport for the first time.

Team composition may also influence the transition. Established teams often contain strong friendship networks and informal roles that can make newcomer integration more difficult, even when exclusion is not intentional. In contrast, groups with inclusive norms may allow new members to develop connections more rapidly.

Perceived similarity represents another source of variation. Participants may initially feel more comfortable when they perceive common interests, values, or communication styles among teammates. However, similarity should not be treated as essential for belonging, because inclusive group norms can also support strong connection within diverse teams.

Autonomy may also change during the transition. Individuals who are accustomed to controlling their own schedules and participation decisions may experience team routines as restrictive. If a team environment becomes overly controlling, increased relatedness may occur alongside reduced autonomy, producing a more complex motivational experience.

Leadership can further shape newcomer adjustment. Leaders influence group identity, communication norms, role expectations, and opportunities for interaction. Supportive leadership may help newcomers understand their place within the team, whereas less inclusive leadership may make integration more difficult.

Interaction frequency is equally important. Formal membership alone does not guarantee meaningful social contact. Participants who attend irregularly may have fewer opportunities to develop familiarity, relationships, and recognition within the group.

Individual differences in social confidence may also affect the speed of adjustment. Some participants may require more time to initiate conversations, seek support, or feel comfortable in established social groups.

The structure of the activity may produce additional variation. Highly cooperative sports may generate more interpersonal contact than loosely organized recreational activities, while competitive climates may introduce status, selection, or performance concerns that influence how belonging develops.

Finally, practical barriers such as work commitments, transportation, cost, location, and competing responsibilities may affect continued participation independently of social belonging. Pasted text

8. Research Contribution / Implications

The principal contribution of this paper is the conceptualization of social belonging as a transition process rather than a fixed characteristic of team membership. Joining a recreational team does not automatically mean that a participant feels accepted or socially integrated. Belonging may instead develop through repeated interaction, peer support, recognition, shared experiences, and gradual incorporation of the team into the individual's social identity. Pasted text

A second contribution is the distinction between social belonging and social identity. Social identity concerns the psychological importance of group membership, whereas belonging concerns whether an individual feels accepted, connected, and included within the group. These processes may reinforce one another, but they should remain analytically separate.

A third contribution concerns the role of peer support during transition. Teammates can assist newcomers by providing practical information, emotional reassurance, encouragement, and opportunities for interaction. These behaviours can communicate acceptance and help reduce uncertainty during the early stages of team entry.

The fourth contribution is methodological. Future studies should assess belonging repeatedly and combine self-report measures with attendance records and relational data. Such an approach would allow researchers to distinguish regular participation from genuine psychological integration and provide a more complete account of how team membership develops over time.

Practical Implications

- **Structured newcomer integration:** Recreational teams should create opportunities for newcomers to interact with established members rather than leaving social integration entirely to chance.

- **Peer connection:** Informal peer-support practices may help new members understand routines, communication patterns, and expectations.
- **Inclusive team norms:** Teams should communicate that recreational participation is valued even when participants differ in skill or performance level.
- **Shared activities:** Cooperative tasks can create additional opportunities for interaction and relationship development.
- **Recognition of membership:** Acknowledging newcomers as legitimate members of the group may reduce uncertainty and strengthen inclusion.
- **Supportive leadership:** Leaders can promote a shared sense of group identity while avoiding unnecessary conformity pressure.
- **Belonging assessment:** Organizations may periodically assess whether participants feel accepted, connected, and socially integrated.
- **Retention monitoring:** Psychological belonging should be considered alongside attendance and continuation data.
- **Transition-sensitive programming:** Participants moving from individual sports may require time to adjust to more socially coordinated environments.
- **Autonomy preservation:** Team settings should retain reasonable opportunities for personal choice so that greater social connection does not unnecessarily reduce perceived autonomy. Pasted text

9. Conclusion

Transitioning from individual sport participation to team-based recreational sport involves a meaningful change in the social organization of physical activity. Participants move from settings that can often be managed largely through personal preferences toward environments characterized by shared routines, communication, collective expectations, and recurring interpersonal interaction. The transition may therefore influence not only participation behaviour but also how individuals understand their social position within the activity setting. The conceptual framework developed in this paper proposes that social belonging may emerge gradually through repeated interaction, peer support, team identification, shared participation, and recognition of membership. These experiences may reduce interpersonal uncertainty and provide opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop. Over time, the team may become part of the participant's social identity, while participation itself acquires greater interpersonal significance.

The simulated values illustrate this proposed pattern, with social-belonging scores increasing from 2.84 at individual-sport baseline to 3.58 during early team transition and 4.31 after established participation. These values are hypothetical and cannot be interpreted as evidence of statistical significance, causal relationships, or population-level effects. The simulated indicators assigned to team identification, peer support, and interaction frequency are likewise methodological illustrations rather than empirical contribution estimates.

Existing research nevertheless provides a strong theoretical basis for the proposed framework. Social identification has been associated with participation and positive exercise experiences, while group-exercise research has linked group membership with social support and exercise identity. Repeated-attendance studies further suggest that stronger group identification can be associated with continued participation.

The transition should not, however, be assumed to produce uniformly positive outcomes. Team composition, leadership, perceived compatibility, social confidence, activity structure, competitive climate, previous experience, and practical barriers may all influence adjustment. Some participants may increase their interaction without developing strong belonging, while others may identify with the team yet continue to feel socially peripheral.

Future empirical research should therefore examine the transition longitudinally and distinguish social belonging from social identity, cohesion, social support, and exercise identity. Combining self-report measures with attendance records and social-network data would provide a stronger basis for understanding how team relationships emerge and under what conditions recreational sport becomes a genuinely socially integrating experience.

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10. Limitations

The primary limitation of this manuscript is the absence of original empirical participant data. All quantitative values presented in the Results section are simulated and are intended only to illustrate how the proposed relationships might be represented analytically.

A second limitation concerns conceptual overlap among social belonging, social identity, group cohesion, social support, and exercise identity. Although the present paper distinguishes these constructs theoretically, future empirical research would need validated instruments and appropriate statistical procedures to demonstrate discriminant validity.

A third limitation arises from the diversity of recreational sports. Team-based activities differ substantially in group size, level of interdependence, competitive climate, leadership

structure, and frequency of participation. A mechanism observed in one sport may therefore not generalize directly to another.

Participant heterogeneity represents an additional limitation. Previous team experience, interpersonal preferences, age, sport identity, social confidence, and motivation may all influence how individuals respond to the transition.

Another limitation concerns the difference between perceived belonging and actual social integration. Participants may report feeling connected despite having relatively few relationships within the team, while others may attend regularly without experiencing strong belonging.

Existing group networks may also influence newcomer adjustment. Participants joining established teams enter environments where friendships, informal hierarchies, and social routines may already exist. Their integration may therefore depend partly on the openness of existing members.

Team leadership is another contextual influence. Leaders can shape group identity, norms, participation opportunities, and inclusion, making it difficult to isolate peer-level processes unless leadership behaviour is also measured.

Practical constraints such as scheduling, transportation, cost, accessibility, and competing responsibilities may affect participation independently of belonging. Temporal limitations should also be considered because short follow-up periods may capture initial adjustment without identifying longer-term changes in identity and social connection.

Finally, because the findings are simulated, the present manuscript cannot establish causality, statistical significance, effect sizes, or generalizability. Pasted text

11. Future Work

Future research should examine the transition longitudinally, beginning before participants enter a team-based recreational sport environment. Baseline assessments could measure exercise identity, social expectations, autonomy preferences, previous team experience, and perceptions of individual-sport participation. Follow-up assessments could then determine how belonging changes after team entry.

Different stages of transition should also be examined separately. Early participation may be characterized by observation and uncertainty, whereas later stages may involve greater familiarity, stronger relationships, and increased identification. Repeated measurement would

help determine whether belonging develops gradually or changes more strongly following particular social experiences.

Peer support should be examined in greater detail. Emotional encouragement, informational assistance, companionship, validation, and practical help may not have identical effects. Future studies could investigate which forms of support are most important during initial adjustment and whether their influence changes over time.

Social-network analysis represents another valuable methodological direction. Researchers could identify whom newcomers communicate with, seek assistance from, and trust during the transition. Changes in these networks could then be compared with changes in social belonging and team identification.

Future research should also examine perceived similarity without assuming that homogeneous teams necessarily produce better outcomes. Similarity may contribute to comfort and identification, but inclusive group norms may allow diverse participants to develop equally strong belonging.

Leadership should be incorporated as an important contextual variable. Future studies could examine whether supportive or identity-oriented leadership indirectly improves newcomer belonging by encouraging interaction and promoting inclusive norms.

Experimental or quasi-experimental research could evaluate structured newcomer-integration strategies. Such interventions should be designed carefully so that they support natural social connection rather than artificially imposing relationships.

Finally, future studies should distinguish psychological belonging from behavioural retention. Some participants may remain in teams despite weak belonging because of practical or motivational reasons, while others may develop strong belonging but discontinue because of external constraints. Combining psychological measures with objective attendance and membership-duration data would provide a stronger empirical foundation for understanding recreational sport transitions. Pasted text

12. Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this manuscript.

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No external funding was received for the preparation of this simulation-based conceptual manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This manuscript does not report original research involving human participants. All quantitative values presented in the Results section are simulated and included solely for conceptual and methodological illustration. Any future empirical study involving human participants should obtain appropriate institutional ethics approval where required and follow applicable procedures for informed consent, confidentiality, privacy protection, secure data management, and participant welfare.

Data Availability

No empirical participant dataset was generated or analyzed for this manuscript. The numerical values presented in the Results section are simulated and are provided solely for conceptual and methodological illustration. Pasted text

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