

Beyond the game: Social interaction, motivation, and well-being in 3x3 basketball

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the social, psychological, and recreational motives underlying participation in 3x3 basketball, a rapidly growing urban sport that combines physical activity with informal social interaction. A total of 305 athletes aged 12–60 years competing in officially organized 3x3 basketball tournaments in Greece completed validated instruments assessing recreational experiences and participation motives. The findings revealed that social interaction constituted the primary motive for participation, with strong emphasis on being with friends, team affiliation, and opportunities for forming new social connections. Participation was also closely associated with escape from daily routines and social pressures, contributing to psychological restoration, emotional balance, and perceived well-being. Achievement-related motives were mainly linked to social recognition and affirmation of personal competence, highlighting the importance of intrinsic motivation. High levels of enthusiasm, enjoyment, and creativity reflected the fast-paced, flexible, and expressive nature of the 3x3 format. Exercise-related motives emphasized physical fitness, positive feelings following activity, and health maintenance. Overall, the results highlight the multidimensional recreational value of 3x3 basketball as an accessible sport that promotes social connectedness, psychological well-being, and sustained engagement in physical activity, with important implications for community-based recreational sport programs and quality-of-life enhancement.

Keywords: Social interaction, Intrinsic motivation, Recreational sport, Psychological well-being, Quality of life.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sports organizations have increasingly shifted their focus toward developing recreational programs in response to contemporary societal demands for health, well-being, and active lifestyles (Alexandris et al., 2016). Within this evolving context, sports clubs no longer operate exclusively as competitive institutions but increasingly function as environments that promote physical activity, social engagement, and positive lifestyle habits across the lifespan. The expansion of sports academies and camps for children and youth reflects this transformation, as such initiatives aim not only at physical development but also at socialization and the cultivation of positive attitudes toward exercise. At the same time, structured recreational programs targeting students and adults have gained prominence, emphasizing participation, enjoyment, and health promotion rather than performance outcomes (Alexandris & Balaska, 2015; Polatidou, 2015). Collectively, these developments highlight the growing role of sports clubs as facilitators of lifelong physical activity and quality of life, offering inclusive participation opportunities to individuals of diverse ages, interests, and fitness levels.

Participation in recreational activities, particularly those embedded in urban or natural environments such as parks, streets, and public spaces, has been shown to create meaningful opportunities for social interaction, personal growth, and sustained engagement in physical activity (Alexandris et al., 2017; Theodorakis et al., 2013). Such activities provide access to novel experiences that enhance perceived quality of life while reducing barriers associated with formal or highly competitive sport settings (Alexandris et al., 2017). Within this framework, 3x3 basketball has emerged as a contemporary and rapidly expanding form of physical activity that combines the enjoyment of play with the benefits of exercise and social interaction. As a variation of traditional basketball, 3x3 is played on a half-court with three players per team and one substitute, allowing for flexible organization in outdoor and urban environments such as public squares and parks. Its accessibility, minimal infrastructure requirements, and short game duration make it particularly suitable for recreational participation without the pressures typically associated with formal competitive basketball. In addition, the sport provides high-intensity physical activity, contributing to improvements in cardiovascular fitness, reaction speed, muscular strength, and overall physical condition.

Participation in sports and organized physical activity plays a critical role in children's and adolescents' physical, social, and psychosocial development. Central to understanding sustained engagement in sport is the concept of sport involvement, defined as the degree of psychological connection, interest, and emotional attachment an individual develops toward a specific activity. Sport involvement has been widely examined in the fields of sport and recreation, with research demonstrating its association with intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, satisfaction, and long-term participation (Alexandris et al., 2006, 2008, 2012; Beaton et al., 2011; Funk et al., 2007, 2016; Kyle et al., 2004; Ridinger et al., 2012). Higher levels of involvement foster emotional engagement and a stronger personal bond with the activity, reinforcing positive participation experiences (Park et al., 2007).

Recreational sport programs are typically designed to promote enjoyment and pleasure, support the development of general and sport-specific skills, enhance physical fitness and performance, and facilitate social interaction and relationship-building among participants, while also promoting sporting values and ethical behaviour (Malina et al., 2004). However, participation in recreational sport is not without barriers. Research by Alexandris and Carroll (1997) indicated that lower educational levels are associated with increased barriers to participation, particularly intrapersonal constraints such as limited prior sport experience, lack of information, and reduced awareness of available opportunities. Subsequent studies further demonstrated that psychological factors, personal characteristics, and time-related constraints

negatively influence engagement in physical activity and constitute significant obstacles to participation in recreational sport programs (Alexandris et al., 2002, 2008).

Establishing habits related to regular physical activity, continued sport participation into adulthood, and lifelong exercise is therefore of considerable importance. Engagement in sport at an early age has been shown to produce long-term benefits for both physical health and psychosocial well-being, supporting holistic development across the lifespan (Malina, 2009). Empirical evidence from recreational sport research consistently indicates positive associations between participation in physical activity, perceived well-being, health status, and overall quality of life (Doyle et al., 2016; Leung & Lee, 2005; Ma & Kaplanidou, 2017, 2018; Wendel-Vos et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the underlying mechanisms through which leisure and recreational sport participation contribute to enhanced quality of life remain insufficiently understood. Iwasaki (2007) and Brajša-Žganec et al. (2011) emphasized the need for further investigation into the pathways linking leisure engagement with well-being outcomes. Existing evidence suggests that recreational activity participation promotes positive emotions, strengthens social connections, facilitates personal achievement, and supports psychological growth, all of which contribute to subjective well-being (Doyle et al., 2016; Downward & Rasciute, 2011; Seligman, 2011). Indeed, achieving well-being is widely recognized as a fundamental human goal (Forgeard et al., 2011).

Parallel to these developments, sporting events hosted in urban outdoor spaces have emerged as one of the most dynamic sectors of contemporary sports tourism. Such events utilize the urban environment as a platform for participation and experience, attracting athletes, spectators, and visitors while enhancing the destination's cultural and social identity. The literature highlights that sports events contribute to tourism development by integrating athletic activity with entertainment and community engagement, generating social, economic, and cultural benefits for host locations (Chalip, 2004, 2014; Chalip et al., 2017; Chalip & Costa, 2005). In this context, recreational and participatory sport events extend beyond competition, functioning as social experiences that promote community cohesion and active lifestyles.

Against this broader backdrop, the rapid global growth of 3x3 basketball has reshaped contemporary sport participation by blending the informal character of street basketball with a more organized and professional structure. Official recognition by FIBA and inclusion in the Olympic program in 2020 have further accelerated the sport's popularity across different age groups and cultural contexts, largely due to its accessibility, fast pace, and entertainment value (Yazici, 2023). Compared to traditional 5x5 basketball, the condensed format of 3x3 creates a highly intense and dynamic playing environment that demands speed, agility, creativity, and rapid decision-making. Importantly, this format appears to satisfy key intrinsic participation motives, including competence, autonomy, and social connectedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Despite its growing popularity and apparent relevance to recreational sport, limited empirical research has examined the social, psychological, and recreational motives that drive participation in 3x3 basketball. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the social, psychological, and recreational motives underlying participation in 3x3 basketball, contributing to a deeper understanding of its role in promoting engagement, well-being, and quality of life within contemporary recreational sport contexts. There are three research hypotheses. Participation in 3x3 basketball is primarily motivated by social factors, as athletes report high levels of social interaction, friendship, group belonging, and the formation of new social relationships (H1). Participation in 3x3 basketball is positively associated with psychological benefits, including escape from daily routine and pressures, increased calmness, balance, enthusiasm, and emotional stimulation (H2). Participation in 3x3 basketball is positively related to physical exercise, creativity, recreational enjoyment, social recognition, and identity expression, making the sport a meaningful component of athletes' lifestyles (H3).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

The study sample included 305 athletes, comprising 65 women (22%) and 238 men (78%), who took part in 3x3 basketball tournaments held across Central, Northern, and Western Greece. Participants had a mean age of 20.78 years (SD = 8.76). On average, they reported remaining with the same team for 5.45 years (SD = 4.08) and having an overall basketball involvement of 10.60 years (SD = 6.54). Data collection took place during officially sanctioned 3x3 competitions. More specifically, the dataset was drawn from two types of events: (1) the 3x3GR National Tour, a nationwide 3x3 tournament series, and (2) 3x3GR events approved by the Hellenic Basketball Federation (HBF).

Measures

Service quality was assessed using the five-dimensional Sport Service Quality Scale developed by Alexandris et al. (2004), adapted to the context of the present study. In addition, the Recreation Experience Preference Scales and Domains (Driver, 1983) were employed to measure experiential motives, including social recognition, creativity, escape from daily routine, and social interaction (e.g., “*I play 3x3 to be with friends*”). These instruments were selected because they have demonstrated strong applicability and validity in both international and Greek research settings and are closely aligned with the objectives and research questions of the current study. A pilot study was first conducted with a satisfactory sample of 60 participants in order to test the questionnaires within the Greek population and ensure their suitability. Following the pilot phase, the main data collection took place, during which all research data required for analysis were gathered from participating athletes.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, School of Physical Education and Sport Science (approval number 289/2025). Data were gathered during official 3x3 basketball tournaments held in Central, Northern, and Western Greece. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals before completing the questionnaires. The research instruments were administered in person at the tournament venues immediately following the athletes' participation in competition. This timing was selected to enhance the accuracy, immediacy, and relevance of participants' responses.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the motivational factors related to participation in 3x3 basketball. Frequencies, percentages, relative frequencies, and cumulative frequencies were calculated for all variables in order to describe participants' responses across the examined dimensions, including social interaction, meeting new people, escape from personal and physical pressures, calmness, goal achievement, enthusiasm, creativity, exercise, and recreation. The distribution of responses allowed for the identification of dominant motivational patterns and experiential characteristics associated with 3x3 basketball participation.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the demographic characteristics of the participants, including age, years of participation with the same team, years working with the same coach, and total years of involvement in basketball. The mean age of the participants was 20.78 years (SD = 8.76). On average, participants

reported 5.45 years (SD = 4.08) of participation with their current team, 3.49 years (SD = 3.42) with their coach, and 10.60 years (SD = 6.54) of total involvement in basketball. Ages ranged from 12 to 60 years, while years of participation variables ranged from 0 to 45 years. A frequency analysis was then conducted for gender, educational level, occupational status, and playing position. Specifically, the sample consisted of 67 women and 238 men. The majority of participants were secondary school students (55.41%), followed by primary school students (19.02%), university students (15.74%), postgraduate degree holders (5.25%), and vocational institute graduates (4.59%). Regarding occupational status, 50.16% of participants identified as students, followed by university students (23.93%), private-sector employees (12.46%), unemployed individuals (5.25%), public-sector employees (4.92%), and entrepreneurs (3.28%). In terms of playing position, the largest group consisted of shooting guards (n = 85), followed by point guards (n = 79), power forwards (n = 52), forwards (n = 51), and centres (n = 37). This information is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of demographic variables.

	Age	Years of playing in the team	Years coach of the team	Years of involvement in basketball
Valid values.	305	304	304	304
Mean.	20.78	5.45	3.49	10.60
Standard deviation.	8.76	4.08	3.42	6.54
Minimum.	12	0	0	0
Maximum.	60	20	30	45

Social interaction

The concept of social interaction was captured through four main categories. The most frequently selected response was “to be with friends” (42.3%), indicating that friendship constitutes the core of social involvement for the majority of participants. This was followed by “to be with team members” (25.9%), highlighting the importance of collective experience and the sense of belonging to a broader group. Additionally, 19.3% of responses focused on “enjoying the company of the people you came with,” emphasizing the pleasure derived from sharing the experience with familiar individuals. Finally, 12.5% selected “to do things with your partners,” reflecting a more intimate and personal dimension of social interaction. These distributions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency distributions for social interaction.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. Hang out with team members.	79	25.9	25.9	25.9
2. Be with friends.	129	42.3	42.3	68.2
3. Do stuff with your buddies.	38	12.5	12.5	80.7
4. Enjoy the company of the people who came with you.	59	19.3	19.3	100

New acquaintances

The concept of new acquaintances is analysed through six different formulations that cover various aspects of social expansion. The most frequent response (24.7%) was “to talk with new and different people,” highlighting the desire for communication with individuals outside one’s usual social circle. This is followed by “to form new relationships” at 21.1%, indicating that many perceive acquaintances as a potential basis for deeper connections. A total of 17.1% chose “to create friendships with new people,” emphasizing the development of stable and positive social bonds. The option “to get to know other people in the area” accounted for 12.8%, linking acquaintances with the local community, while 12.5% answered “to see new faces,” reflecting a more superficial yet potentially important first step. Finally, 11.8% stated simply “to make

new acquaintances,” a more general and open-ended formulation. The above information is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency distributions for meeting new people.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. To talk to new and different people.	75	24.6	24.7	24.7
2. To meet other people in the area.	39	12.8	12.8	37.5
3. To form new relationships.	64	21	21.1	58.6
4. To make new acquaintances.	36	11.8	11.8	70.4
5. To form friendships with new people.	52	17	17.1	87.5
6. To see new faces.	38	12.5	12.5	100

Escape from personal and social pressures

The need to escape from personal and social pressures is reflected in six formulations that express different aspects of the desire to break away from routine. The most frequent response was “*to have a change from your daily routine*,” at 27.9%, highlighting the need for relief and disengagement from habitual patterns. This is followed by “*to do something different from what you usually do*” at 19.7%, emphasizing the importance of diversifying experiences. A total of 16.7% chose “*to have a change in everyday life*,” a formulation that confirms the value of renewal, while 14.8% focused on “*to add some variety to my daily routine*,” stressing the small yet meaningful disruption of monotony. Another 11.1% responded “*to have a change of pace from everyday life*,” expressing the need to alter the way and speed at which daily life unfolds. Finally, 9.8% selected “*to have something different*,” revealing a deeper need for a temporary transcendence of the self and the roles imposed by everyday life. The above information is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency distributions for escaping from the daily routine.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. To have a change from your daily routine.	85	27.9	27.9	27.9
2. To have a change in your daily life.	51	16.7	16.7	44.6
3. To do something different from what you usually do.	60	19.7	19.7	64.3
4. To have a change of pace from everyday life.	34	11.1	11.1	75.4
5. To add some variety to my daily routine.	45	14.8	14.8	90.2
6. To have something different.	30	9.8	9.8	100

Escape from physical pressure calmness

The concept of calmness is analysed through eight different formulations, revealing the multiple dimensions through which participants perceive it. The most frequent response was “*to feel a sense of balance in the things around you*” (17.4%), indicating the need for inner and outer harmony. This is followed by “*to experience calmness*” at 16.4%, which directly expresses the desire for mental tranquillity.

Table 5. Frequency distributions for escaping from physical pressure.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. To experience tranquillity.	50	16.4	16.4	16.4
2. To experience solitude.	26	8.5	8.5	24.9
3. To experience peace and tranquillity.	29	9.5	9.5	34.4
4. To experience a soothing environment.	40	13.1	13.1	47.5
5. To experience an environment that calms and heals.	42	13.8	13.8	61.3
6. To feel a sense of balance in the things around me.	53	17.4	17.4	78.7
7. To enjoy the quiet and beauty.	45	14.8	14.8	93.4
8. To be where there is quiet.	20	6.6	6.6	100

A total of 14.8% mentioned “to enjoy silence and beauty,” linking calmness with aesthetic enjoyment and seclusion, while 13.8% chose “to experience an environment that calms and heals,” emphasizing the soothing qualities of the setting. Another 13.1% stated “to experience an environment that is soothing,” underlining the importance of atmosphere in achieving calmness. Furthermore, 9.5% referred to “peace and calm,” adding a spiritual dimension, while 8.5% perceived calmness through solitude, highlighting the need for isolation. Finally, 96.6% selected “to be in a place where silence prevails,” focusing simply and clearly on environmental quietness. The above information is presented in Table 5.

Goal achievement

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the goal achievement of 3x3 athletes. According to the data of the variable *social recognition*, responses were distributed across ten different options. The most frequent option was “To show others that you can do it”, with 53 responses (17.4%), indicating that the validation of abilities constitutes a key motive for a considerable number of participants. Very close behind was the option “For others to see you doing things you are good at”, which gathered 50 responses (16.4%), highlighting the importance of demonstrating skills within a social context. The option “For others to value you because you do it” received 36 responses (11.8%), while “To do something that impresses others” followed with 35 responses (11.5%). Next, the option “To do something impressive” recorded 33 responses (10.8%), and “To make a good impression on others” was reported with 28 responses (9.2%), emphasizing the significance of the impression one makes on their social environment. Among the least frequent options were the responses “For others to see you doing it” with 16 responses (5.2%), as well as “To be recognized because you did it” and “To receive compliments for your abilities and skills”, each with 14 responses (4.6%). The above information is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Frequency distributions for social recognition.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. To be appreciated by others because you do it.	36	11.8	11.8	11.8
2. To show others that you can do it.	53	17.4	17.4	29.2
3. To be recognized and admired by others because you do it.	26	8.5	8.5	37.7
4. So that others see you doing things you are good at.	50	16.4	16.4	54.1
5. To do something that impresses others.	35	11.5	11.5	65.6
6. To make a good impression on others.	28	9.2	9.2	74.8
7. To do something impressive.	33	10.8	10.8	85.6
8. To be recognized for doing it.	14	4.6	4.6	90.2
9. To receive compliments for your abilities and skills.	14	4.6	4.6	94.8
10. To be seen by others doing it.	16	5.2	5.2	100

Enthusiasm

According to the participants’ responses, enthusiasm is expressed through nine different forms. The most frequent option (21%) was “to experience a lot of action”, indicating that for many participants enthusiasm is associated with intense movement and activity. This is followed by “to experience enthusiasm” (19%), a direct and emotionally charged description of the experience itself, and “to have a stimulating and exciting experience” (15.7%), which emphasizes the intensity and dynamism of experiences.

The option “to experience fast-paced situations” (10.8%) attributes enthusiasm to conditions of speed and intensity, while the responses “to experience thrills” (9.5%) and “to feel good” (9.5%) each highlight that, for several participants, this emotion is linked to inner pleasure and emotional excitement. The option “to live the exciting events that are happening” (7.5%) places emphasis on external reality, whereas “to feel energized”

(3.9%) expresses enthusiasm as internal activation. Finally, “to cause things to happen” (3%) reflects a creative and proactive dimension of enthusiasm. The above information is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Frequency distributions for enthusiasm.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. Feel excitement	29	9.5	9.5	9.5
2. Experience enthusiasm	58	19	19	28.5
3. Experience lots of action	64	21	21	49.5
4. Have a stimulating and exciting experience	48	15.7	15.7	65.2
5. Experience a fast pace	33	10.8	10.8	76.1
6. Feel good	29	9.5	9.5	85.6
7. Get energized	12	3.9	3.9	89.5
8. Experience exciting events	23	7.5	7.5	97
9. Cause things to happen	9	3	3	100

Creativity

Creativity, as expressed through the participants’ responses, is structured into four main categories that encompass both personal expression and cognitive processing. The most frequent response was “to be creative” (29.8%), indicating a direct need for personal expression, imagination, and inventiveness. Very close to this was the option “to create something new or different” (29.2%), reflecting an intention toward originality and innovation through tangible actions.

A total of 22% selected “to put some thoughts or ideas together”, emphasizing the concept of synthesis and mental processing as integral aspects of creativity. Finally, 19% of participants stated that creativity means “to gain a new perspective on life”, thus attributing a more reflective dimension to the concept. The above information is presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Frequency distributions for creativity.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. Be creative.	91	29.8	29.8	29.8
2. Put some thoughts or ideas together.	67	22	22	51.8
3. Create something new or different.	89	29.2	29.2	81
4. Gain a new perspective on life.	58	19	19	100

Exercise

Exercise and physical fitness are important factors for the participants, as reflected in the six different responses recorded. The most frequent option was “to exercise” (28.5%), highlighting the general intention for physical activity as a primary goal. This was followed by “to feel good after physical activity” (20%), indicating that, for many, exercise is directly linked to enhancing psychophysical well-being.

Table 9. Frequency distributions for exercise.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. To exercise.	87	28.5	28.5	28.5
2. To stay in good physical condition.	55	18	18	46.6
3. To improve physical health.	42	13.8	13.8	60.3
4. To maintain physical condition.	38	12.5	12.5	72.8
5. To feel good after physical activity.	61	20	20	92.8
6. To tone my muscles.	22	7.2	7.2	100

Eighteen percent (18%) chose “to maintain good physical condition”, while 12.5% stated “for your physical fitness”, with both responses emphasizing the importance of maintaining physical form. At the same time, 13.8% focused on “improving physical health”, underlining the preventive or therapeutic dimension of exercise. Finally, 7.2% mentioned “muscle toning”, focusing more on the aesthetic or bodily outcome of exercise. The above information is presented in Table 9.

Recreation

The data show that the majority of participants (55.7%) consider 3x3 basketball to be one of the most fun activities, indicating a high level of enjoyment and positive experience from this form of basketball. At the same time, a significant percentage (43.6%) reported that participating in 3x3 tournaments is one of the things that satisfies them, reinforcing the idea that events of this type have a positive impact on participants. These two frequencies highlight the close connection of 3x3 basketball with recreation and personal enjoyment.

It was also observed that the majority of participants (54.8%) enjoy discussing 3x3 basketball with their friends, demonstrating the social and communicative dimension of the sport. A smaller but notable percentage (27.9%) indicated that they are not particularly interested in 3x3, suggesting that the sport does not appeal equally to everyone. Finally, 17.4% stated that 3x3 basketball is very important to them, emphasizing its personal significance for part of the population.

The results show that the majority of participants (53.1%) feel that when they participate in 3x3 basketball, they can be themselves, highlighting the authentic and expressive nature of the sport for these young people. Additionally, 31.1% reported that through 3x3 they can show their value to others, emphasizing the importance of personal validation and recognition through participation. A smaller percentage (15.7%) believe that 3x3 says a lot about who they are, attributing identity and personal image characteristics to the sport. Moreover, for a significant percentage of participants (67.5%), most of their friends are in some way connected to 3x3 basketball, highlighting the social dimension of the sport and its role as a means of networking and belonging to communities with shared interests. At the same time, 32.1% stated that many aspects of their life are organized around 3x3 basketball, indicating that for them the sport is a stable element of their daily routine. These two frequencies demonstrate that 3x3 basketball is not limited to athletic interest alone but also functions as a social and experiential context for many young people. The above information is presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Frequency distributions for recreation through participation in 3x3 basketball.

	Frequency	Percentage	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
1. 3x3 basketball is one of the most fun activities.	170	55.7	55.7	55.7
2. Participating in 3x3 tournaments is one of the things that makes me happy.	133	43.6	43.6	99.3
3. I like talking about 3x3 basketball with my friends.	167	54.8	54.8	54.8
4. I am not very interested in 3x3 basketball.	85	27.9	27.9	82.6
5. 3x3 basketball is very important to me.	53	17.4	17.4	100
6. 3x3 basketball says a lot about who you are.	48	15.7	15.7	15.7
7. When I participate in 3x3 basketball, I can show others what I am worth.	95	31.1	31.1	46.9
8. When I participate in 3x3, I am myself.	162	53.1	53.1	100
9. I think that many things in my life are organized around 3x3.	98	32.1	32.1	32.1
10. Most of my friends are connected to 3x3 in some way.	206	67.5	67.5	99.7

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study highlight the complex and multidimensional nature of participation in 3x3 basketball, demonstrating that engagement is shaped by an interplay of social, psychological, emotional, and physical motives. Rather than being perceived merely as a competitive sport, 3x3 basketball emerges as an experiential context through which participants satisfy multiple personal and social needs. This perspective is consistent with contemporary research in recreational sport, which emphasizes the experiential and psychosocial dimensions of sport participation beyond performance outcomes (Alexandris et al., 2006; Funk et al., 2016). One of the most salient contributions of this study is the identification of social interaction as a central driver of participation. Friendships, team affiliation, and shared experiences were shown to play a pivotal role in motivating engagement, reinforcing previous findings that highlight the importance of social bonds and interpersonal relationships in recreational sport contexts (Kyle et al., 2004; Beaton et al., 2011). Moreover, the opportunity to interact with unfamiliar individuals and establish new social connections suggests that 3x3 basketball functions as a space for social development and informal networking, supporting the notion that sport participation contributes to social capital formation and community integration (Chalip et al., 2017).

Another important finding concerns the psychological role of 3x3 basketball as a mechanism for coping with everyday demands. Participants consistently associated their involvement with relief from routine and social pressures, indicating that participation functions as a form of psychological escape. This aligns with leisure research suggesting that recreational activities provide opportunities for stress reduction, mental detachment, and emotional recovery (Iwasaki, 2007; Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011). Notably, despite its fast-paced and competitive characteristics, 3x3 basketball was also linked to feelings of calmness and emotional balance. This coexistence of stimulation and restoration reflects the dual role of physically engaging leisure activities in promoting psychological well-being (Downward & Rasciute, 2011; Doyle et al., 2016).

Motivation related to goal attainment and social recognition further enriches the understanding of participation dynamics in 3x3 basketball. The opportunity to demonstrate skills and gain acknowledgment from others reflects the importance of competence affirmation within a social context. Importantly, recognition appears to be socially embedded rather than externally rewarded, reinforcing the role of intrinsic motivation in sustaining participation. This finding is consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes competence, autonomy, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs underlying motivated behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The dynamic structure of 3x3 basketball was also strongly associated with enthusiasm, excitement, and emotional activation, supporting previous research that links high involvement and enjoyment with sustained engagement in sport (Alexandris et al., 2012; Park et al., 2007).

Creativity emerged as another meaningful dimension of the 3x3 experience. Participants emphasized originality, improvisation, and the integration of ideas, highlighting the flexible and open nature of the format. This creative freedom may differentiate 3x3 basketball from more structured forms of the sport and enhance motivation and satisfaction, as creative engagement has been linked to positive effect and personal growth in leisure contexts (Iwasaki, 2007; Seligman, 2011).

Finally, exercise- and recreation-related motives confirm that physical activity and enjoyment remain fundamental elements of participation. The findings indicate that 3x3 basketball allows participants to express their identity, feel authentic, and integrate sport naturally into their social relationships and daily routines. Such outcomes align with evidence demonstrating strong associations between recreational sport participation, quality of life, and subjective well-being (Leung & Lee, 2005; Wendel-Vos et al., 2004; Forgeard

et al., 2011). Overall, the present study contributes novel empirical evidence by positioning 3x3 basketball as a comprehensive recreational sport experience that integrates physical activity, social interaction, emotional engagement, and personal development, helping to explain its growing popularity among young people.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present study demonstrate that participation in 3x3 basketball is primarily driven by social and psychological motives, complemented by exercise-related benefits. Social interaction emerged as the dominant factor, with participants strongly motivated by friendship, team belonging, and opportunities to expand their social networks. In parallel, involvement in 3x3 basketball was associated with escape from daily routines and social pressures, contributing to emotional balance, calmness, and psychological restoration. Achievement-related motives were mainly expressed through social recognition and the affirmation of personal competence, indicating that participation satisfies intrinsic needs rather than externally imposed performance goals. The fast-paced and flexible structure of 3x3 basketball was closely linked to heightened enthusiasm, creativity, and enjoyment, supporting sustained engagement and personal expression. Additionally, participants consistently identified 3x3 basketball as a recreational activity that facilitates identity expression and integrates naturally into their social and everyday lives.

Taken together, these findings position 3x3 basketball as a multidimensional form of physical activity that simultaneously promotes social connectedness, psychological well-being, and regular exercise participation. The results underline the relevance of 3x3 basketball for youth sport development, recreational sport programming, and community-based physical activity initiatives aimed at enhancing quality of life and fostering long-term engagement in sport.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Dimitrios Stavropoulos contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, coordination of data collection, and interpretation of the results. He also contributed to drafting and revising the manuscript. Georgia Stavropoulou served as the corresponding author and contributed to the study design, statistical analysis, interpretation of findings, and primary drafting and critical revision of the manuscript. Apostolia Ntovoli contributed to data collection, data organization, and preliminary analysis, and assisted in the interpretation of findings and manuscript revision. Christos Galazoulas contributed to the methodological framework, supervision of data analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content. Evangelos Kontaxakis contributed to data collection, management of the research process during field implementation, and critical review of the manuscript. Afroditi Lola served by contributing to the overall research design, methodological guidance, theoretical framework, supervision of the research process, interpretation of results, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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AI STATEMENT

AI-assisted tools were used exclusively for language translation and linguistic editing to improve clarity and readability. All study design decisions, data analyses, results, and interpretations were conducted and produced by the authors.

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