

MIXED DOUBLES IN UNIVERSITY TENNIS AS A TOOL FOR SOCIALIZATION AND INTERCULTURAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract: Mixed doubles in university tennis represent a unique and multifaceted form of athletic interaction that combines the competitive nature of tennis with the complex social dynamics arising from cooperation between male and female student-athletes. In contrast to singles or same-gender doubles, the mixed doubles format requires a particularly high degree of interpersonal communication, emotional awareness, mutual trust, cooperative decision-making and adaptive strategic thinking. These characteristics make mixed doubles an especially effective platform for fostering socialization, strengthening interpersonal relations and encouraging prosocial behavior within the university environment. University sport is widely recognized as an important arena for developing social capital among students, and participation in mixed doubles further reinforces these processes by promoting respectful cross-gender interaction, enhancing teamwork skills and creating natural opportunities for forming new social networks and supportive peer relationships. Beyond gender dynamics, mixed doubles hold significant potential for intercultural integration, particularly in universities with diverse international student populations. When teams include players from different cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds, the cooperative nature of the format stimulates intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and the development of global competencies such as empathy, tolerance, cultural sensitivity and effective cross-cultural communication. These competencies are increasingly essential in contemporary higher education, where universities emphasize internationalization, diversity and inclusivity as core institutional values. The collaborative challenges inherent to mixed doubles—such as coordinating tactics, adjusting to partner’s playing styles and negotiating communication differences—contribute to personal growth, adaptability and intercultural competence. Existing literature suggests that participation in mixed-gender team formats also supports students psychological well-being by reducing feelings of social isolation, increasing self-confidence and providing a sense of belonging to the broader academic community. Engagement in mixed doubles encourages emotional regulation, cooperative problem-solving and shared responsibility, all of which contribute to healthier and more resilient psychosocial functioning. This paper offers a conceptual examination of mixed doubles as a pedagogical, social and intercultural mechanism, highlighting their capacity to promote social cohesion, interpersonal development and international student integration within university sport structures. The discussion underscores the relevance of incorporating mixed doubles more systematically into university tennis programs to expand opportunities for meaningful social engagement, cross-gender collaboration and constructive intercultural interaction, thereby enhancing the holistic development of student-athletes.

Keywords: mixed doubles, university tennis, socialization, intercultural integration, student-athletes

1. INTRODUCTION

University sport is widely acknowledged as an important contributor to students physical health, psychological well-being, and social development. For many students, participation in sport is one of the main ways they build friendships, experience a sense of belonging, and manage academic and personal stress. Within this broader context, tennis offers a distinctive combination of individual responsibility and partner-based coordination. Mixed doubles in

particular stand out as a format in which success depends on close cooperation between male and female players, who must learn to coordinate their actions, communicate clearly, and trust one another in moments of pressure. Research on university sport environments emphasizes that participation in organized sport supports the development of social capital, defined as networks of relationships characterized by trust, reciprocity, and shared norms (Clopton, 2011). Student-athletes often gain access to dense social networks that facilitate both academic and personal adaptation. In the context of internationalization, where many universities host increasing numbers of foreign students, sport also plays an important integrative role. International student-athletes rely on sport-based communities to navigate new cultural settings and build stable support systems (Forbes-Mewett and Pape, 2019). Within tennis specifically, doubles formats add an additional layer of interpersonal complexity. Studies of doubles teams demonstrate that intrateam communication is a key determinant of performance, as players must exchange tactical information, coordinate positioning, and provide emotional regulation for one another (Lausic et al., 2009). These communication demands are even more pronounced in mixed doubles, where gender expectations, physical differences, and cultural backgrounds intersect. Cross-cultural communication competence has been identified as an important factor in successful partnerships, as players negotiate differences in communication style, directness, and emotional expression (Perez et al., 2019). Mixed-gender sport environments offer a rich arena for examining how gender norms and expectations shape interaction. Research on sex integration in sport suggests that mixed-gender participation can simultaneously challenge and reproduce traditional gender roles, depending on how the environment is structured and framed (Channon, 2016). In mixed doubles tennis, etiquette and unwritten norms around power, responsibility, and protection can influence how male and female players interact, but they can also be renegotiated in ways that foster more equal and collaborative relationships (Lake, 2016). Beyond interpersonal processes, the social structure of mixed doubles supports the formation of social capital and provides a context for psychological support. College sports teams often function as primary networks of belonging, especially for international students who may be isolated from their home communities (Forbes-Mewett and Pape, 2019). Social capital has been shown to contribute significantly to psychological well-being and identity development among student-athletes, acting as a protective factor in periods of stress or transition (Jiang and Shen, 2025). Tennis participation itself has been associated with reduced depressive symptoms and increased prosocial behaviors among university students, especially when the environment provides appreciative and supportive interactions (Sun et al., 2025). Finally, mixed doubles in internationalized university environments can contribute meaningfully to intercultural learning. Cooperative sport activities involving participants from different cultural backgrounds are known to promote intercultural sensitivity, empathy, and communication awareness (Puente-Maxera et al., 2020). Structured sport programs can enhance social inclusion by creating spaces where students from different cultures interact on the basis of shared goals rather than differences (Carter-Thuillier et al., 2023). Sport participation has also been linked to the development of global communication competence in higher education settings (Lukianets and Lukianets, 2020). Against this background, the aim of this article is to conceptualize mixed doubles in university tennis as a specific form of sport-based socialization and intercultural integration, and to synthesize research that clarifies the mechanisms through which this format contributes to student development.

2.MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article adopts a narrative and integrative review approach to synthesize evidence from multiple research domains relevant to mixed doubles in university tennis. Studies were selected based on their conceptual and empirical relevance to doubles communication, mixed-gender sport interaction, social capital among student-athletes, and intercultural learning through sport. Peer-reviewed research in sport psychology, sociology of sport, physical education, intercultural communication, and higher education was included. Both recent and foundational works were used in order to present an analysis that is grounded in established knowledge while also reflecting current developments.

The integrative review method allows for the combination of diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical findings without being constrained by the strict criteria of systematic reviews. The goal is not to evaluate the effectiveness of a specific intervention, but rather to build a multidimensional conceptual understanding of mixed doubles as a social and educational environment. The literature judged to be relevant is therefore interpreted in relation to the central questions of how mixed doubles influence socialization, psychological well-being, and intercultural integration among university students.

3.RESULTS

The integrated analysis suggests that mixed doubles in university tennis contribute to student development through four interrelated mechanisms: communication and coordination, gender interaction, social capital formation, and intercultural competence development.

The first mechanism concerns the communication and coordination demands inherent in doubles tennis. Lausic and colleagues describe how successful doubles teams create structured patterns of communication that facilitate tactical decision-making and emotional regulation (Lausic et al., 2009). Partners must constantly exchange information about positioning, shot selection, and opponents tendencies, while also managing their own and each other's emotional responses. These demands encourage the development of communication skills such as clarity, timing, listening, and supportive feedback. When doubles partners come from different cultural backgrounds, these communication processes are further shaped by cultural norms around expressiveness, directness, and hierarchy, requiring heightened cross-cultural communication competence (Perez et al., 2019).

The second mechanism relates to gender interaction. Mixed doubles place male and female players in relationships of explicit interdependence, where the success of the team depends on each players contribution. Research in mixed-gender sport environments shows that such settings can challenge stereotypes about male dominance and female passivity when properly structured and supported (Channon, 2016). In mixed doubles tennis, etiquette and behavioral expectations often reflect complex negotiations around strength, power, and protection (Lake, 2016). However, university environments that emphasize equality and respect can encourage players to develop more balanced partnerships in which both athletes share responsibility for leadership, decision-making, and performance.

The third mechanism involves social capital and psychosocial outcomes. Clopton argues that intercollegiate sport participation creates both bonding social capital within teams and bridging social capital across different social groups, reinforcing a sense of community and belonging (Clopton, 2011). These networks are important in mediating access to emotional support, academic resources, and personal guidance. International student-athletes, in particular, rely heavily on sport-based networks for social integration and emotional stability when adjusting to new cultural and academic environments (Forbes-Mewett and Pape, 2019). Jiang and Shen identify social capital as a significant predictor of psychological well-being among student-athletes, mediated through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and the development of a stable athletic identity (Jiang and Shen, 2025). Sun and colleagues provide evidence that tennis participation reduces depressive symptoms and promotes prosocial behavior in university students, with appreciative social support acting as a key mediating factor (Sun et al., 2025). Mixed doubles, by requiring dyadic cooperation and sustained interaction between partners, can amplify these benefits by creating especially close and supportive interpersonal relationships.

The fourth mechanism concerns intercultural competence. Studies on sport-based education show that cooperative, game-centred learning activities involving participants from different cultural backgrounds can effectively foster intercultural sensitivity and awareness (Puente-Maxera et al., 2020). Carter-Thuillier and colleagues highlight how after-school sports programs can facilitate social inclusion and positive group relations in contexts marked by social and cultural diversity (Carter-Thuillier et al., 2023). Lukianets and Lukianets argue that participation in international sport and tourism education contributes to global communication competence by providing authentic opportunities to practice intercultural communication skills (Lukianets and Lukianets, 2020). In mixed doubles, these processes are intensified by the need for close coordination and emotional cooperation between partners who may differ not only in gender, but also in nationality, language, and cultural norms.

4.DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this integrative review highlight mixed doubles in university tennis as a multifaceted environment that supports communication skills, gender-equitable interaction, social capital, and intercultural competence. The requirement for continuous verbal and non-verbal coordination encourages players to refine their communication abilities in authentic, high-pressure situations (Lausic et al., 2009). They must convey information efficiently, respond constructively to mistakes, and support each other emotionally, all of which contribute to the development of transferable interpersonal skills. When partners come from different cultural backgrounds, they are additionally challenged to recognize and adapt to differences in communication style, emotional expression, and expectations about leadership, which strengthens cross-cultural adaptability (Perez et al., 2019).

The gender-integrated nature of mixed doubles creates opportunities for re-examining gender roles in sport. When coaches and university sport structures explicitly support equality and mutual respect, mixed doubles can become a space where both male and female athletes share responsibility for tactical decision-making and leadership. This challenges traditional patterns of male dominance and female support, promoting more reciprocal forms of collaboration (Channon, 2016). At the same time, unbeaten norms of etiquette and courtesy, such as expectations that male players protect their female partners, can reflect broader societal patterns of gender relations (Lake, 2016).

Conscious reflection on these norms and their impact can help students develop more critical and egalitarian perspectives on gender in sport and beyond.

Social capital emerges as a crucial outcome of mixed doubles participation. The close partnership at the heart of mixed doubles can foster deep bonds of trust and mutual support, which in turn feed into broader networks within the team and university community (Clopton, 2011). For international students, such partnerships may become a key anchor of emotional stability and social integration, helping them navigate both academic and personal challenges (Forbes-Mewett and Pape, 2019). Research reports positive associations between social capital, psychological well-being, and identity development, suggesting that mixed doubles may contribute to students resilience and self-esteem (Jiang & Shen, 2025). Research further demonstrates that appreciative and supportive relationships in tennis can reduce depressive symptoms and encourage prosocial behaviors, strengthening the view that mixed doubles can be beneficial for mental health when the environment is positive and inclusive (Sun et al., 2025).

Intercultural competence is also significantly enhanced within mixed doubles settings. When student-athletes cooperate closely with partners from different cultural backgrounds, they confront real-life challenges of language, communication style, and cultural expectations. Well-designed sport education experiences can promote intercultural sensitivity and awareness, particularly when students engage in cooperative activities that require communication across cultural differences (Puente-Maxera et al., 2020). Structured sports programs have also been shown to foster social inclusion and positive relationships among diverse participants, supporting the development of shared norms and mutual understanding (Carter-Thuillier et al., 2023).

Involvement in sport and tourism higher education contributes to global communication competence by providing authentic opportunities for intercultural interaction and collaborative learning (Lukianets and Lukianets, 2020).

Mixed doubles offers precisely such a context, where shared goals and mutual dependence necessitate cooperation across cultural differences.

Taken together, these insights support the conclusion that mixed doubles in university tennis should be understood not only as a competitive sport format, but also as an important educational and social platform. It helps students develop practical communication skills, nuanced understandings of gender relations, emotionally supportive relationships, and intercultural awareness that can benefit them far beyond the tennis court.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Mixed doubles in university tennis constitute a powerful tool for supporting student socialization, psychological well-being, and intercultural integration. By requiring cooperation across gender and, frequently, cultural lines, mixed doubles provide a rich environment for developing communication competence, empathy, and social capital. The evidence synthesized in this review suggests that mixed doubles can contribute to inclusive and supportive university communities, particularly when coaches and institutions consciously promote equality, respect, and intercultural openness. Universities that wish to strengthen student engagement, improve mental health, and support the integration of international students should consider expanding opportunities for participation in mixed doubles and integrating such formats into broader student development strategies. Future research should explore the lived experiences of student-athletes in mixed doubles, using qualitative and longitudinal designs, in order to better understand how these processes unfold over time and how they can be best supported through coaching and institutional policies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of university tennis coaches, student-athletes, and sport educators whose insights and experiences have helped to shape the conceptual analysis presented in this article.

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