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Perceived Barriers and Motivation for Physical Activity Participation of Non-Athlete Students

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ABSTRACT:
This research examined the Barriers and Motivation for Physical Activity participation of non-athlete undergraduate sophomore students at a state university in the Philippines. The overall aim was to discover the internal and external elements influencing students' physical activity participation, which included their physical activity, academic obligations, individual preferences, peer and family support, and availability of venues and other resources. A phenomenological approach was employed for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten guided participants to investigate their experiences and opinions about the phenomenon. Thematic analysis was used to explore the participants' lived experiences. Using thematic analysis, two themes were clear: (1) Perceived Barriers to Physical Activity, and (2) Internal and External Motivators for Participation. Barriers were a lack of motivation and self-efficacy, academic demands, time for both academic obligations and schedules, and socio-cultural expectations. Facilitators consisted of strong social support, perceived health awareness, personal fitness or wellness goals, and access to opportunities for physical activity. The findings pointed to students' participation in physical activity being influenced by several factors, which culminated in the interplay between the different personal, academic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. These findings can guide universities in developing meaningful and effective physical activity programmes (interventions) to support non-athlete university students in their pursuit of physical activity and holistic well-being.

Keywords: Barriers, Motivation, Healthy Lifestyle, Non-Athlete, Physical Health

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1. INTRODUCTION

Physical Activity (PA) is a very important part of a healthy life, as it improves our physical, emotional, and mental health. Based on the World Health Organization (2020), physical activity among university students serves an essential function to enhance academic performance, enhance positive mood, whereas reduce chronic disease risk (obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes). While physical activity benefits are increasingly being acknowledged and organizations are beginning to more actively promote opportunities for physical activity, an issue remains with regard to young adult and university student physical inactivity across the globe. As per Guthold et al. (2020), a global survey approximated that 4 out of every 5 teenagers were not getting the level of physical activity recommended, and this trend continues to college, where sedentary behavior is a significant health problem.

Within school environments, non-athlete students typically encounter special barriers to being physically active. Current research suggests that a variety of internal and external factors are responsible for students engaging

or not engaging in physical activity. Intrinsic factors driving ways to feel good for stress management, enjoyment, and health awareness will be some of the first drivers for physical activity engagement, while extrinsic factors like support from peers and others, facility and opportunity access for physical activity, and body image can play a significant role in sustaining engagement, (Safra & Andal, 2022; Teixeira et al., 2021; Martin & Santos, 2015). Non-athletes also have more structural barriers such as not having time, not being motivated, or not having space/equipment to exercise, which have frequently been cited by students as crucial hindrances (Brown et al., 2024; Dagum et al., 2024). Non-athlete students are also more vulnerable to intrapersonal and contextual barriers than their athlete student peers, who have structured training, team pressure, standards, and institutional resources (Li & Zuo, 2022; Silva et al., 2023).

Whereas literature has otherwise documented sufficient evidence of the benefits to health associated with consistent physical activity and described the constraints encountered by non-athletes, there is limited research on how these students subjectively experienced and interpreted such constraints over the course of their lives as university students. It should be remembered that sophomore students are a unique subset of students who might be experiencing transition both between adjustment and more intense involvement in the university experience. Thus, investigation into sophomore sense-making of fitness, and how these evolve over time and impact involvement in physical activity, is all but nonexistent. This lack is a significant lacuna in creating effective, socially inclusive, and sustainably active physical wellbeing programs at a university level for the student population as a whole.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine sophomore non-athlete students' attitudes towards fitness and physical activity participation at State University. By revealing the way these students define, experience, and navigate the personal and environmental contributors to their participatory behaviors, this research will seek to inform student-focused health promotion interventions. Direct support of healthy student development, stewardship of an enhanced campus feeling of wellbeing, and nurturing a culture of ongoing inclusivity and active involvement will be made possible.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, the research approach is qualitative. It aligns in phenomenological that focus on the understanding and describing the lived experiences of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon. The purpose of this study is to understand the sophomore college students from State University who were non- athletes, perceived barriers The aim of this research is to comprehend the sophomore college students at State University who were non-physical activity, perceived motivators and barriers to physical activity. Based on Kerlinger (1986) research design is the investigation plan, structure, and strategy devised to secure responses to research questions and to manage variance. The category of Non-Experimental Research Design, Descriptive Research, which is Descriptive Research, is the design that researchers will use in this study. This design is very useful when acquiring concrete and in- depth knowledge regarding particular real-world topics and problem because it involves the discretion, analysis, and interpretation of condition that currently exist. We will conduct Interview using questions to get or gather the data and points of view of the chosen respondents.

Primary Data The researchers gathered or collected data from the primary sources conducting social interviews with the sophomore college students from State University who were non-athletes, to understand how they perceive physical fitness and its role in their lives.

Partcipants

The researchers utilized a purposive sampling technique to deliberately choose individuals who satisfied the criteria aligned with the study's goals. There were 10 sophomore college students participants from State University who were non-athletes, meaning they were not affiliated with any university varsity or sports team. This group was chosen because they represent a segment of the student population likely to

have limited structured involvement in physical activity. Their academic routines and lifestyles provided meaningful insights into how non-athlete students perceive and experience physical fitness within their

daily lives.

Research Locale

This study will be conducted at State University in the Philippines. The campus is home to a diverse student population and offers various physical education facilities, such as open grounds, a gymnasium, and sports amenities. However, not all students, especially those outside athletic programs actively participate in these facilities. The university setting provides a relevant context to explore how non-athletic students, particularly those in demanding academic programs. The focus of this research is on sophomore college students who are not actively involved in athletic activities or sports organizations. These students are typically immersed in rigorous academic work and may face time constraints, stress, and sedentary habits, which can influence their views and engagement with physical fitness.

Data Collection

The data collection started after obtaining formal approval from research advisers, the course professor, and relevant institutional offices to ensure adherence to ethical standards. Participants were selected non-athlete sophomore student in State University. Informed consent was obtained, presenting the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, together with the participants' right to withdraw their information without any consequence. Participation was voluntary and limited to those who signed the consent form.

In this study we utilized in-depth semi-structured Interviews gathered through the means of audio recording which are well-suited for capturing the lived experiences and personal viewpoints of participants. We choose this as a tool because it provides flexibility and depth, allowing participants to express their thoughts and feelings freely. Moreover, the researcher provided an interview guide, containing open-ended questions which aims to explore students' personal understanding, experiences, and attitudes toward physical activity. These methods highlighted the subjective perceptions of non-athlete students and encourage them to engaged and articulate how physical activity influences their daily lives.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered for this investigation consisted mainly of student opinion and experience of those students who are not athletes regarding physical fitness and its applicability in their everyday lives. The analysis strategy applied is Thematic Analysis, which is known to be an approach to identify, examine, and describe recurring themes within qualitative data which can be further classified and interpreted. Thematic analysis was adopted as being highly suitable in accessing attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. Fitting into this, it would be useful to know how the student-athletes view physical fitness: The analysis steps were Data Familiarization All interview or open-ended questionnaire responses were transcribed and read several times to ensure a thorough understanding of them.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how non athletes specifically, sophomore non-athlete students at State University perceive physical fitness and its role in their lives, focusing on the barriers, motivators, and the role of academic and personal experience with the levels of their physical activity.

1. Perceive Barriers to Physical Activity

The findings revealed the lived experiences of non-athlete students in relation to their physical activity, as shown in the Perceived Barriers to Physical Activity, the identified barriers by students are Lack of Confidence, Academic Pressure, and Social Expectations. Each of the themes presented provided an insight into how students perceived and interact with physical activity within the context of their academic and personal lives.

Theme 1: Lack of Personal Drive and Confidence

Lack of self-confidence is a sense of doubt and insecurity regarding one's own capabilities, self-worth or confidence. This can adversely affect social relationships, career and life in general. Lack of self-confidence can generally be rooted in factors like unpleasant experiences, hypersensitivity to criticism, negative thought patterns, environmental or family influences, fear of failure. One of the most common challenges to physical exercise among non-athlete students was a lack of confidence. According to the participants, P2s and "Low confidence and lack of interest are the main reasons I don't engage in physical activities." P5 "My confidence also affects my participation I'm afraid people will judge me if I make a mistake." P6. These answers reflect personal hindrances such as a lack of motivation, self-efficacy, and drive, And the loss of motivation that keeps students from getting involved in physical activities, as if something inside them is quietly saying, "Maybe not today."Most of them expressed fears of judgment or failure. Others lacked the energy or interest to do so Martin et al. (2016) posits that the motivation level of Filipino college students is a key component in whether students will or will not engage in physical activities. Students who are encouraged—whether they love exercising, want to remain healthy, or wish to make themselves physically attractive—are more likely to sign up for sports, exercise, or other fitness programs. Conversely, students who are not interested or don't understand the value of physical activity will avoid it. It is an indication of how crucial it is for teachers and schools to realize what motivates the students, and they can thus develop more interesting and impact physical education programs that promote active and healthy living. According to Rodriguez-Ayllon et al. (2019). They established that young people and young adults with low body confidence and self-esteem tend to be less engaged in physical activities. Their study also emphasized the psychological burden students will have when they perceive that they are "unable" or experience apprehension regarding how their peers might view them. I also need to mention some of the more up-to-date research the highlights low self-confidence in exercising. Aljehani et al. (2022) examined physical activity engagement among Saudi Arabian female undergraduate students and found that psychological obstacles limited their participation in physical activity engagement. The investigation identified methods to incorporate psychological strategies into their beneficial experiences from physical activity, which could be useful to overcome their limitations such as a low level of motivation, lack of self- confidence, or social evaluation discomfort.

Theme 2: Academic Pressure

Academic pressure is the level of stress and demands students faced such as school works and expectations to perform well academically (Santos et al., 2021). This result for students to feel tired and exhausted, that could lead for them to skip physical activity and prioritize studying to meet deadlines. One of the perceived barriers to physical activity experience by the non-athlete were related with academic pressure. Since Academic demands were identified as major hindrances to physical activity. Other participant shared, "Academic load really affects my participation in physical activities, as person who can't manage her time well it affects my participation into physical activities" P4 and "Due to the busy schedule, especially with academic loads and other responsibilities, I can't really find time to participate in physical activities" P7. According to the research proposed by Al-Etmiami et al. (2020) their study reveal that the Female University students in the United Arab Emirates, packed academic workloads and scheduling conflicts with facility hours can significantly discouraged participation in exercise. Students expressed that by the time they completed their school requirements, they were too tired, and the sports facilities either felt intimidating or were always full. This illustrates how physical and mental exhaustion caused by academic workloads, combined with inaccessible or uncomfortable exercise environments, discourage students from becoming active. Furthermore, Estrada-Araoz et al. (2025) also reported that Peruvian students experienced barriers like lack of time, energy, and insufficient proper exercise environments, which made it difficult for them to maintain an active lifestyle, particularly for those with demanding academic workloads.

Theme 3: Social Expectations

Several respondents stated that cultural and social expectations serve as a major part in why participants faced challenge in participate in physical activity. One student shared, "There's a mindset that prioritizes schoolwork

over physical health, so being active is often overlooked or undervalued" P2. Another added, "Sometimes, I feel like people might judge me if I try. In my environment, being active is not really talked about or encouraged, so I never grew up doing it."P8. These responses showed how cultural norms and social pressures can discourage students from being active in engaging physical fitness. In a study by Faulkner et al. (2021), it was found that cultural values and family influence often shape the level of importance given to physical activity. For many, especially in academic-driven environments, physical health takes a backseat to school performance. Likewise, by Lipošek et al. (2019) demonstrated that students are more likely to feel unmotivated or ashamed to exercise when they perceive that physical activity is not supported or normalized by their families or peers. This also align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which suggests that progress is strongly build by our environment, including the culture and people around us. If students grow up in homes or communities that do not showned or promote physical fitness and see it as unimportant activity, they're less likely to participate or feel confident in doing so (Vygotsky, as cited in McLeod, 2020).

2. **Internal and External Motivators for Physical Activity Engagement**

The current findings of study revealed the factors that motivate or facilitate nonathlete students in their engagement in physical activities. As we can see in Internal and External Motivators for Physical Activity Engagement were related to the following dimensions: Social Influences, Health Awareness, and Availability of Opportunities. Each of themes presented provided an insight into how students perceived and interacted with physical activity within the context of their academic and personal lives.

Theme 1: Social Influence

Support from other friends and families and also from others emerged as a significant motivator for students in engaging in physical activities. Although one participant (P1) said that peers do not have much influence on their decision to participate in physical activities, the most indicated that support and companionship from friends played a key role in enhancing their motivation, confidence, and enjoyment. Two participants stated that "Having some supportive friends makes a big difference. Like if my friends ask me to join or me asking them, I'm more confident and motivated." P3 and "It's highly motivating when you have someone to be physically active with. It creates a safe space for me, and I know I'm not alone in doing it" P6. These answers reflected the strong emotional and psychological impact of social encouragement. P3 highlights how motivation can stem from mutual invitations and support, which build confidence and reduce feelings of hesitation. Meanwhile, P6 touches on the deeper emotional aspect: the sense of safety and belonging that comes from shared activity.

According to Yang et al. (2022) found that families or friend support significantly influences physical activity behavior among college students by enhancing both confidence and engagement. The presence of encouraging friends helps students feel more secure and motivated to participate. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2025) showed that peer support directly and indirectly affects engaging physical activities through improved self-efficacy. They said that students who received encouragement from their friends were more likely to adopt and sustain active behaviors. However, Li, Huang, and Sun (2025) showed that peer support is a strong predictor of exercise adherence, with psychological resilience serving as a partial mediator. This means that students supported by peers not only participate those physical activities more but also handle setbacks better, helping maintain physical activity routines. This study confirmed that the social environment, especially peers, is a key factor to boost their motivation and sustaining physical activity among students. As a student athlete of Central Luzon State University and with my own experiences. Being active with someone I trust removes the pressure of being judged and makes the activity feel more enjoyable and less stressful. Just knowing someone is doing it with me whether it's jogging, dancing, or playing Volleyball and basketball provides a high level of comfort that makes it easier to start and continue. It shows that physical activity isn't just about physical effort but it's also deeply social and emotional.

Theme 2: Health Awareness

Health personal goals and awareness of wellness benefits motivate a person. As some participant said, for example, "My own understanding in health benefits encourages me to try some physical activities, although I'm not into sports, but it has helped me increase my energy level and have a strong body" P4 and, "But thinking

about simple goals like having more energy or better sleep makes me want to start, even if it's just little by little" P5. Considerable recent literature suggests that enjoyment, autonomy, and individual preferences are crucial to sustaining physical activity and improving mental wellbeing.In Pyrah's view (2024), the government-direction towards reaching physical activity standards may have negative mental health implications. According to the report of the article, heavily drawing sports psychologist and neuroscientists, mental health benefits are best gained when people move in a manner that they enjoy instead of following rigid guidelines.

For example, spontaneous dancing, outdoor play or social games can turn out to be more sustainable and rewarding from the emotional end compared to a strict regimen. Thus, intrinsic motivation-most commonly with health and well-being attached-encourages students to think about being physically more active, perhaps through very small initial steps. Furthermore, according to the study of Baisheva et al. (2019) and Miller (2023) a supportive environment can encourage students towards adopting a healthier lifestyle by means of different initiatives, including educational programs and physical activity offerings. It inspired students to create personal health goals that will enhance the knowledge of regular physical activity and balanced nutrition. Such report is related to out findings in that it demonstrated students were more likely to sustain an active and healthy lifestyle when informed and guided by personal objectives.

Theme 3: Availability Opportunities

Several respondents related their level of access to physical activity resources to engagement, including one who stated that having access to "facilities like parks, trails, community centers provides big opportunity for providing activities like Zumba, fun run, sports, etc" P2, another who said "If there were more programs or places near me that were free or easy to join, I'd probably give it a shot. It's easier to be active when there's a fun or organized event to go to" P7, and a third who stated "Having access to facilities, programs, and events definitely helps me become more physically active." These findings are consistent with what current research indicates, namely that accessibility is the most important facilitator of physical activity; as Wong et al. (2021) and Santos (2024) concluded the proximity to facilities, availability of free and open spaces for exercise, and access to structured programs (e.g., fun runs or group events) all strongly predict levels of physical activity. Kwan et al. (2019) also found that neighborhoods where exercise is available and enticing, whether through affordable fitness options or planned events, engage residents more frequently because it provides structure and social encouragement; these are places that make movement possible but also attractive and sustainable. This idea relates to Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1986), which states that the environment is a key factor in behavior.

As a student, this access matters because growing up where there were no free fitness options or free activities to be active, it was not until our local barangay offered free Zumba classes or weekend sports that movement became easy and enjoyable instead of something I felt like I had to do or only something athletic people did. By providing accessibility, enjoyment, and sense of community we offer the motivation for health.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, non-athlete sophomore students at State University acknowledge that physical activity is important, however they are often held back by internal barriers such as low confidence, and external barriers such as workload and culture. Ultimately, friends with support, knowledge on health impacts of physical activity, and convenient, inviting physical activity programming are all factors that increase students' likelihood to participate.

This study suggests that while students have some knowledge of the value of physical activity, their feasible opportunities in engaging are contingent upon social support and convenient programs. Educational institutions need to acknowledge that non-athletes require different interventions to help them navigate the environmental and psychological barriers.

5. RECOMMENDATION

1. For students: Establish achievable personal health related goals and secure physical activity/ recreation, that you enjoy and will follow through on. Consider supportive peer groups or accountability partners to maintain motivation. Use simple, low-risk activities and advance your skills for confidence.
2. For schools and educators: Offer physical activity and recreation as flexible and inclusive programs within the school timetable. Teach wellness education that connects physical activity, academic success, and mental wellness and make available self-motivation and time management training for students.
3. For parents/families: Create the home environment that values and promotes physical activity. Provide moral support, which can alleviate some of cultural or emotional stigma around fitness.
4. For institutional leaders: Implement free or low-cost recreation programs, accessible for non-competition sports students. Initiate peer-led fitness events and community-based activities to build an active engagement culture.
5. For future researchers: Broaden the participant group to include students of varying year levels or other institutions. Further explore the "intention-behavior gap" and assess interventions that have direct links or intention to action.

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