

Navigating the Importance of Physical Activity Among Senior High School Students

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ABSTRACT:

Physical activity plays an important role in the health of adolescents; however, most students, particularly those in senior high school, are not participating in any form of exercise or physical activity, or are inactive. In this study, the researchers used a qualitative phenomenological research approach, using purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with eight senior high school students, both grade 11 and 12 levels, from the Agricultural Science and Technology School (ASTS), Philippines. This study explored how senior high school students perceive the importance of engaging in daily physical activity in their lives. This analysis aimed to understand their motivation, attitudes, and barriers to engaging or staying active. The finding revealed three central themes: (1) Perceptions of the Importance of Physical Activity in the Daily Lives of Senior High School Students. This section highlights how students see physical activity as good for health, stress relief, and overall well-being. (2) Attitudes of Senior High School Students Toward Participation in Physical Activity. This part reveals the motivational and social factors that influence students' willingness to take part. (3) The Effect of Physical Activity Engagement on Students' Daily Lives. This section shows how being active helps with their emotional balance, academic focus, and social interaction. The result highlights students' perception of the value of daily physical activity in their lives. It suggests that schools and communities should offer friendly, accessible, and supportive programs that will benefit both students and their communities. By listening to their voice, stakeholders may create better opportunities that support overall well-being.

Keywords: physical activity, senior high school students, phenomenological research approach

1. INTRODUCTION

Daily physical activity is vital for individuals of all ages, delivering benefits that go beyond physical fitness to include mental health and cognitive development. It supports cardiovascular health, lowers the risk of chronic illnesses, and contributes to improved emotional well-being. Additionally, physical activity enhances mood, builds self-confidence, boosts academic and extracurricular performance, and helps manage stress. Gallardo (2023) found that adolescents with higher levels of PA in their daily lives had significantly higher AP than those with lower physical activity levels.

Apart from health-related advantages, physical activity plays a key role in building social connections. Engaging in team sports or group fitness encourages the development of communication skills, relationship building, and shared interests. Eime et al. (2020) emphasized that team-based activities offer opportunities for social bonding, teamwork, and a sense of belonging. Such involvement also allows individuals to enhance leadership qualities, build self-esteem, and develop a stronger sense of well-being.

In the Philippines, the Health-Optimized Physical Education (HOPE) program is designed to encourage physical activity and healthy living among students. It provides diverse physical activities that suit various skills and preferences, including team and individual sports, as well as fitness routines. These not only improve physical health but also promote teamwork, discipline, and sportsmanship. The Department of Education (2020) describes HOPE as a tool for developing both fitness and knowledge in physical education, helping senior high school students form lifelong healthy habits.

Technology and social media have significantly shaped how students perceive physical activity (Martin et al., 2017). While digital platforms offer fitness resources and workout videos, they also encourage sedentary behaviour through gaming, browsing, and streaming (Santos et al., 2022). According to Nakshine et al. (2022), dependency on digital devices resulting in an ever-increasing daily screen time has subsequently also been the cause of several adverse effects on physical and mental or psychological health. Also, prolonged screen time and academic pressure contribute to inactivity, negatively affecting both physical and mental well-being. Still, platforms like Instagram and Facebook may also motivate students to engage in physical activity by allowing them to document and share their fitness progress and connect with like-minded peers. Despite the clear importance of physical activity, limited research focuses on how senior high school students view its daily relevance. While many studies explore the benefits or challenges of physical activity, few examine student perceptions directly. A small number of studies have studied how senior high-school students openly view the daily physical activity significance, particularly in Philippine factors. Despite that several studies high point it's benefits Only a few qualitative studies examined students real-life experiences, struggles, and motivation. On the other hand, the majority of recent studies focus on academic or physical outcomes. (Murfay et al., 2022). There is the Hope program that promotes healthy behaviors among the students (Department of Education, 2020), but stakeholders don't have an idea how their students view and respond to these programs These insights are further affected by ICT resources such as growing screen time and digital dependency (Nakshine et al., 2022). By looking into students personal experiences and views. This study helps bridge the gap in understanding by offering insights that can support the creation of more relevant and effective physical activity interventions. The study would increase understanding of the senior high school students' meanings of daily physical activity with the intention that more purposeful programs/interventions were created to assist students in staying active and making healthier choices. The findings were useful for educators, administrators, policy makers, and health practitioners for future health promotion initiatives.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore high school students' perspectives of habitual participation in physical activity. The study explored the students' lived experiences while they engaged in or thought about prolonged engagement in physical activity within the context of their personal life and academic life. Because it is helpful when thinking about how best to capture the essence of lived experience, phenomenology explores the complex subjective meaning high school students ascribe to their habitual physical activity. The study drew on phenomenology to identify recurring themes or trends of students' perspectives on the impact of habitual physical activity on their academic achievement, social development, mental health, and physical health.

Participants

The researchers targeted participants based on purposive sampling in a non-probability sampling design, which is a type primarily applicable to qualitative research. The purposive sampling method was helpful in the intentional selection of Senior High School students who had ongoing exposure to daily physical activity and who could articulate their perspective with clarity. The identified sample comprised students from two different academic strands and included students from both years 11 and 12. This helped to provide a variety of experiences and perspectives. Data collection was done using semi-structured, in-depth interviews that the researcher recorded and took notes on. This format created a space to honour how the participants expressed

their experience, while also keeping the researchers focused on guiding the discussion to relevant themes. The data then went through phenomenological analysis and was organized into significant statements. These statements were grouped into meaningful themes that were strung together to present a story that expressed the essence of the students' perspective.

Research Locale

The State University in Central Luzon, Region III, located in Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, Philippines, took place where research conducted. This school was chosen due to its proximity to the researchers and because of the friendly relationship between the school and the university. Under this relationship, students (mostly athletes) may use the university sports facilities (gym and courts) to train and exercise. Furthermore, functions as a practice teaching venue for Physical Education (PE) major students from the university.

Data Collection

Before data collection, permission was sought from the school principal and class advisers. After receiving clearance, a timetable was developed to conduct interviews at specific times, minimizing disruptions to class schedules. The researchers explained the purpose of the study, ensured confidentiality, and obtained consent for audio recording. Participants' questions were addressed during the interviews, and they were encouraged to share honest and thoughtful responses. The audio recordings were used exclusively for research purposes, and participants' privacy was strictly maintained.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative study, thematic analysis was used to examine the responses of Grade 11 and 12 students regarding their perceptions of the importance of daily physical activity. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to identify and interpret patterns of meaning from participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis will be followed these steps: transcribing all the recorded interviews word-for-word; generating the relevant words, phrases and statements; identifying the themes and grouping the similar codes into broader categories and key ideas; reviewing and refining themes to ensure they were clearly and accurately defined and supported by the data; and lastly, interpreting the themes that were analyzed and interpreted to understand students' beliefs, values and experiences related to physical activity. Direct quotes were used to support and illustrate the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.) Perceptions of the Importance of Physical Activity in the Daily Lives of Senior High School Students

This section shows how senior high school students perceive the significance for daily physical activity. Based on their responses, they considered physical activity as both fun and good to their health. Students stated that physical activity or exercise helps them become physically healthy, handle mental stress, establish friendships, and focus more on academic work.

The interview answers revealed four main themes that shows how students view physical activity: (1) Understanding the Value of Physical Activity, (2) The Importance of Physical Activity for Mental Health and Overall Wellness, (3) Behavioral and Perceptual Perspectives on Physical Activity, and (4) The Role of Physical Activity in Stress Management.

The themes that are developed through this SOP identify the personal meaning, value, and benefit that students place on physical activity in their daily lives.

Theme 1: Understanding the Value of Physical Activity

This theme demonstrated how students comprehend what it means to be physically active. Most students said that it involved both moving the body and consuming energy.

"Physical activity is moving your body... like dancing, walking, and running," (P1).

"It's when your body is not just in one place. You're doing something, using energy," (P9).

"If you're active, it means you're using your muscles and not just sitting all day" (P6).

These responses align with the global definition from the World Health Organization (2020), which stated that physical activity "is any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. However, Martins et al. (2021) the comprehension and involvement of adolescents in physical activity are influenced by a range of environmental and psychosocial factors, not only psychosocial factors, not only physical movements.

According to their systematic review, perceptions and behavior regarding physical activity are greatly influenced by a variety of factors, including motivation, peer pressure, enjoyment, access to facilities, and the school environment all significantly contribute to how adolescents experience and engaged with physical activity. Physical activity is therefore not only a function of body exertion but also socially and emotionally situated behaviour.

Theme 2: The Importance of Physical Activity for Mental Health and Overall Wellness

Students frequently said that they value physical activity because of its benefits for physical and mental health. The Majority believed that it would assist them in feeling healthier and improve their mood.

"Physical activity helps me maintain my body and health, and I also feel better mentally after doing it," (P5).

"It strengthens my body. I think it can protect me from sickness," (P7).

"I feel happy after exercising. It changes my mood when I'm not feeling okay" (P12).

This connects with what Lubans et al. (2021) along with Martin & Santos (2019) found that doing physical activity during the teenage years can improve mental health, help students feel better about their bodies, and lower feelings of anxiety. Nevertheless, students in the study indicate that they value physical activity because it makes them feel healthy and improves their mental well-being. Rebar et al. (2024) offers a more detailed and evidence-based understanding of how physical activity affects mental health.

According to their systematic review and best-evidence synthesis, the relationship between physical activity and mental well-being is not straightforward. Their findings show that physical activity improves mental health not just because of the act of moving, but also because it positively influences how young people feel about themselves, how they relate to others, and how they cope with stress.

Theme 3: Behavioral and Perceptual Perspectives on Physical Activity

Students said that physical activity is not just a one-time school activity, but a regular habit that helps them live a healthy and disciplined life.

"It's important because it makes us stronger, and it becomes part of our daily life," (P2).

"I do physical activity not just in school but at home too because I want to live a healthy life," (P10).

"Exercise is part of my routine. Even just walking or cleaning counts for me" (P8).

Rodríguez-Romo et al. (2023) and Martin & Santos (2015) reported that teens who see physical activity as part of who they are and do it regularly are more motivated from within and make better health choices. However, Fernandez-Espinola et al. (2022) argue that this type of regular participation does not occur in isolation or just as a result of individual willpower. Their meta-analysis examined interventions based on Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). They found that adolescents are more likely to adopt and maintain a physically active lifestyle when they have organized, motivating environments.

Their results show that goal-oriented strategies, meaningful feedback, and support for autonomy greatly enhance students' intention and motivation to engage in regular physical activity. Instead of depending on students' sense of discipline, the study highlights the importance of creating learning environments that meet students' basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Fernandez-Espinola et al. demonstrate that intentional, theory-based interventions are often necessary to build the internal motivation required for lasting behavior change, contrary to the belief that physical activity becomes a habit just through personal commitment.

Theme 4: Role of Physical Activity in Stress Management

Students said they often engage in physical activity or exercises when they feel stressed, feel exhausted, or emotionally unstable. The Majority responded that moving their bodies is their way of coping to improve mood and reduce stress.

"I feel stressed after studying, so I like to stretch or dance to feel lighter," (P6).

"When I'm sad or tired, doing exercise changes my mood," (P4).

"When my emotions are too heavy, I go outside and walk—it clears my mind" (P11).

Garcia-Tascón et al. (2021) found that adolescents who engage regularly in physical activity handle feelings better and feel less stressed. Although physical activity is usually linked to better mood and stress reduction, Pascoe et al. (2020) offer more comprehensive and systematic perspective, as students mainly perceived in this study primarily viewed physical activity as an individual stress coping mechanism for immediate tension or emotional discomfort-such as stretching or dancing after school.

The findings of their review showed that regular, structured physical activity programs, particularly that include strength training or aerobic exercise, are consistently associated with long-term improvements in mental health, including lower level of stress, anxiety, and depression in young people.

In contrast, Pascoe et al (2020) that the psychological advantages of physical activity are most pronounced when exercise is regular, planned, and guided-often as part of a program or curriculum. Students highlighted impulsive or casual activity as a response to feeling "sad", "tired", or "emotionally unstable". On their review, occasional or unplanned physical activity may only yield a temporary mood boost, but regular, consistent exercise over time builds mental health and emotional strength.

2.) Attitudes of Senior High School Students Toward Participation in Physical Activity

In this section, Students' perceptions of physical activity, especially in the classroom, are presented. The results show how students' motivational factors, social environment, and perceptions of the school program affect their willingness to engage or participate in physical activity. Common motivators include peer encouragement, enjoyable school activities, and positive attitudes toward fitness; common barriers include limited options and interests. These include social connections and institutional support. These attitudes are influenced by both internal and external factors.

This section describes students' previously divergent views and responses to physical activity in four main themes. Four main themes emerged from the responses that describe how important attitudes are to participation: (1) The Impact of School and Environment on Participation; (2) Attitudes Regarding the Type of Activity; (3) Self-Confidence and Body Image; and (4) Perceived Support from Coaches and Teachers.

Theme 1: The Impact of School and Environment on Participation

This theme emphasizes that they are more likely to participate in physical activity when they are with their peers, and how students' peer groups and school environment affect their willingness to participate.

"If my friends are active, I participate more. I feel more confident and happier," (P14). "I would be more involved if it were a group activity. It's tiring to be alone," (P11).

"When my classmates are excited, it makes me want to join too. It feels more fun when everyone is doing it" (P10).

Adolescents who attend school in a socially supportive environment are more likely to be physically active (Vaquero-Solís et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2016). On the same manner, Buško & Bezinović (2020) identify sport participation as a protective factor that fosters school attachment and mental well-being. Their overview emphasizes that supportive school social environments fostering physical activity, thereby increasing self-esteem and reducing depression.

This is consistent with the argument that social context is a critical role contributor to adolescent well-being through participation in sport.

Theme 2: Attitudes Regarding the Type of Activity

A few students disclosed that their engagement is based on how much they feel the enjoyment or how they are connected to physical activity. Activities that they do not like or are unfamiliar with decrease participation.

"I enjoy badminton, but in sports that require a team, I feel awkward" (P7).

"It is up to whether I enjoy the activity. (P1)

If I don't like it, I don't go playing" (P2).

Silva et al. (2020) highlighted that participation by adolescents is greatly determined by the enjoyment of the physical activity. In the same manner, Panza et al. (2020) underlined that enjoyment is one most important and strongest predictors of long-term physical activity among youth, adding that teenagers are more inclined to participate in different exercise routines that they find enjoyable and rewarding to them.

Theme 3: Self-Confidence and Body Image

Student self-concept and perceived physical competence were significant in determining their attitude. A few were hesitant to engage because of shyness or they have insecurity about their body.

"I feel shy when other people are looking at me playing. I don't think that I'm not good enough" (P5).

"Sometimes I want to join, but I get self-conscious of my body" (P8).

"I get nervous when I think people are watching how I move. I feel like I'll mess up" (P12).

Sabiston et. al (2022) commented on how self-consciousness and fear of being judged are major barriers that affect how they will engage in different physical activities. Similarly, Graupensperger et al. (2021) identified that regular sport involvement across adolescence is associated with improved mental health outcomes, such as lower depressive symptoms.

The research further identified that socially supportive sporting contexts enhance such benefits, affirming the function of social context in ensuring physical and emotional well-being through physical activity.

Theme 4: Perceived Support from Coaches and Teachers

Students commented on how they are encouraged more when their coaches or teachers actively support them. Praise, give them motivation, and organize a count.

"When our PE teacher cheers us on, I get more excited to do it," (P6).

"The coach made me feel I can do it, even when I doubted myself," (P3).

"When our teacher says we did a good job, I feel proud and want to keep going" (P13).

González-Valero et al. (2022) stated that student engagement in different physical activities increases when instructional leaders or coaches give regular encouragement and motivation to students. Similarly, Chi and Wang (2022) reported that sport-involved youth reported significantly less depression and anxiety symptoms, highlighting the potential of peer and coach support in maximizing mental well-being benefits.

3.) The Effect of Physical Activity Engagement on Students' Daily Lives

This section examines how students' engagement in physical activity impacts the different aspects of their day-to-day experiences. Participants shared how being physically active sustained them in regulating their emotions, helped to concentrate in class, established social relationships, and boosted their overall energy level. Many expressed feeling more positive and productive on the day they engaged in physical activity in their physical, psychological, and social wellness. Their responses led to four developing themes that underline the multidimensional impact of physical activity in their daily process.

The student responses reflected four major themes explaining the daily impact of physical activity: (1) Physical activity as a source of Energy and Emotional Balance, (2) Influence on Academic Focus and Performance, (3) Building social Interaction and Peer Relationships, and (4) Influence Daily Routine and Time Management.

Theme 1: Physical Activity as a Source of Energy and Emotional Balance

Students shared feelings of energetic and emotionally stable after participating in physical activity. It helps them to manage their mood and prevent fatigue.

"Working out helps me to lessen stress and improve my mood. I feel a lot better after," (P9).

"By engaging in physical activities, it lessens my stress and improves my mood" (P12).

"When I exercise, I don't get tired easily in class, and I feel more positive the whole day," (P3).

This supports Biddle et al. (2019), variable effect sizes are evident from interventions for the reduction of anxiety and improvement in self-esteem. Higher or improved fitness and physical activity are associated with better cognitive health and performance (Martin et al., 2017). Though, Van Sluijs et al. (2021) stated that "the intensity of physical activity for many adolescents falls far short of the level required to promote these benefits," which

emphasizes the need for greater support to increase physical activity time in school to promote emotional well-being truly.

It implies that the positive effect of physical activity on emotional well-being is based on adequate participation, which is often lacking in students' daily lives.

Theme 2. Influence on Academic Focus and Performance

Exercise was seen as a mental reboot that would promote greater academic focus and performance. Stressful days of school drove some students to it.

"After I walk around or exercise, I can concentrate on my homework more" (P10).

"It clears my mind. It's easier to sit down and do homework" (P4).

"After moving around, my mind becomes clear, and I can focus on my studies better," (P2)

These responses are aligned with Donnelly et al. (2019), research found that physical activity enhances cognitive function, attention, and academic outcomes in children and youth. This means that regular physical activity can improve students' mental capability and academic performance by improving their readiness for learning. However, some studies indicate that the relationship between physical activity and academic performance is not necessarily simple. For instance, Singh et al. (2019) found that although physical activity tends to benefit cognition, excessive or poorly timed exercise could temporarily reduce attention or fatigue some students, potentially hindering academic tasks afterward.

This implies that the advantage of physical activity on academic focus depends on factors like timing and intensity.

Theme 3: Building social Interaction and Peer Relationships

Students explained how physical activity helped establish stronger friendships and trust. Being involved in regular physical activity offered chances for bonding and shared experiences.

"When we play together, we get closer. It's fun, and we laugh a lot," (P1).

"It's easier to make friends when you join the activities," (P11).

"We always bond during PE time, and that's when I got close with my classmates," (P14).

A study by Coyne et al. (2020) found that students who participate in team or group activities experience more peer support and emotional safety. Socializing with peers during activities not only promotes bonding but also contributes to mental well-being by providing a sense of belongingness and community to students involved. Although physical activity promotes positive peer relationships, certain studies also point out that negative social interaction in physical education (PE) settings may hinder students' engagement and well-being. For instance, De Bruijn and Grimminger-Seidensticker (2025) demonstrated that perceived peer acceptance strongly predicts students' satisfaction of social needs and enjoyment in PE, but perceived peer acceptance varies and may affect social competence and physical activity levels differently.

This implies that some students might continue to face social challenges or feel excluded in PE settings, which can affect their motivation and participation.

Theme 4: Influence Daily Routine and Time Management

Students said they learned to manage their time better when they had to fit in physical activity with schoolwork and chores. Activity became part of their daily routine.

"I learned to make a schedule so I can study and still have time to dance or work out," (P13).

"It became a habit to move after classes, like a part of my daily life" (P6).

"Because of regular activity, I learned how to plan my day and avoid wasting time," (P7)

These responses align with studies showing that regular physical activity helps teens who engage in regular physical activity gain life skills like time management and self-discipline. Nilsen et al. (2021) noted that teenagers who regularly engage in physical activity tend to develop better habits for using their time and more self-discipline. However, a recent study points out that new challenges are making it increasingly difficult for teenagers to maintain physical activity as a daily habit. Smith and Lee (2024) found that despite knowing the benefits, most teenagers find it challenging to maintain regular physical activity because of growing digital distractions, increased academic pressure, and mental health challenges.

Although physical activity can help with time management, modern barriers like the use of technologies and stress often prevent teenagers from maintaining these good habits.

4. CONCLUSION

Some key findings responding to the three main study questions came from the thematic analysis of student answers and statements.

First, there was a consistent recognition on the part of the students that the physical activity was beneficial for their overall well-being. They linked it to mental health benefits, such as stress reduction, improved mood, and being more alert and attentive, in addition to the physical gains of having more energy, being stronger, and being physically fit. Students believed that physical activity formed part of a healthy lifestyle and that it was a good means of adapting and to cope up with the demands in school, even when spending more such as time and motivation.

Second, students' perceptions strongly influenced the amount of time they spent on physical activity. Positive attitudes in participation were encouraged through socializing, associated with enjoyment with their peers, and willingness to try different physical activities. Inclusive activities that were interesting, enjoyable, and enhanced participation, particularly with their friends, also participated, or when activities were appropriate and beginner-friendly. On the other hand, no confidence or negative attitudes in trying new physical activities restricted students from participating, justifying the provision of choice in physical activities in school programs to be available and accessible.

Third, students' daily lives were improved through physical activity. Most individuals reported that they are feeling more motivated, concentrated, and productive in carrying out their personal and academic projects. Physical exercise was not just a way to reduce stress, but it also helped students to bond and have more connection with their family and friends on a deeper level. Students described how a healthy lifestyle enabled them to create a more organized routine as well as develop their time management skills.

To sum it up, the findings of this study confirmed that senior high school students believed that physical activity was essential to live a healthy and well-balanced life. Their thoughts emphasized that making an inviting environment that promotes fun, accessible, and inclusive physical activity is of great importance and much needed. Student participation improved even more when their attitudes were always positive and consideration was taken into their personal experiences, which ultimately supported their health, academic success, and overall well-being.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Encouraged and supported to continue participating in daily physical activity, including areas according to the findings and conclusions of the study, the following are suggested recommendations for ensuring that students for future research:

1. Include Daily Physical Activity in School Schedules

Schools should incorporate short periods of physical activity into the daily schedule. This can include stretching, brain breaks, or morning exercises to promote students' mental and emotional health. Future studies could look at the long-term academic benefits of teamwork.

2. Support Enjoyable and Inclusive Physical Activity Programs

Encourage schools to implement inclusive and enjoyable physical education programs. It should offer a variety of enjoyable, safe physical activities that appeal to a range of interests and ability levels to maintain student interest across all groups. The influence of different programs on participation in diverse students is a possible area for future research.

3. Enhance Family and Community Involvement

Family-based programs that include active behaviors outside the classroom can be effective. Schools and communities can work together to organize fitness events. Family support and peer social influence can build continued participation and This could be examined by future researchers.

4. Offer Tools for Self-Monitoring and Personal Goal Setting

Having students keep physical activity journals, self-monitoring of student motivation, time management, and emotional control, or track on their smartphones can foster regularity and self-knowledge. Researchers could explore how this impacts.

5. Facilitate Teacher and Policy Engagement to Promote Physical Activity

Schools can educate teachers to incorporate movement into the curriculum through training and resources. To incorporate movement into the curriculum, schools can make teachers learn through training and resources. How school policies and teacher perceptions affect student participation in physical activity in future research that could be examined.

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