

Understanding the Barriers to Active Participation in Physical Education among College Students: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: Physical education (PE) can help students improve their physical health, confidence, social skills, and overall well-being. However, many college students have difficulties that prevent them from actively participating in physical education programs. This study aimed to investigate and comprehend barriers that prevent college students from participating in Physical Education activities. A descriptive phenomenological research design was used in this study. The study involved ten students from a state university in the Philippines. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, which was then evaluated thematically. The findings revealed that students faced many personal, environmental, and societal limitations in PE. Personal barriers included a lack of confidence, feeling uneasy about being assessed, lacking in physical fitness, health problems, and a lack of athletic experience. Extreme weather conditions, overcrowding and inadequate facilities, and severe academic demands were among the environmental barriers encountered. Social influences also influenced involvement, as students were frequently under pressure to compare themselves to more talented classmates, although support from peers and teachers enhanced their motivation. Despite these barriers, students used a variety of coping strategies, including maintaining an optimistic attitude, practicing consistently, developing their skills, and seeking assistance from family, friends, and teachers. According to the study, students were more likely to actively participate in Physical Education when they feel confident, supported, physically prepared, and in a safe and comfortable learning environment. The findings may assist instructors, school officials, and future researchers in developing strategies and initiatives to increase student involvement and create a more inclusive and supportive physical education experience.

Keywords: Physical Education, College Student, Barriers to Active Participation

1. Introduction

Physical Education (PE) is a fundamental component of higher education that promotes students' physical, psychological, social, and emotional well-being. Beyond the development of motor skills and physical fitness, PE provides opportunities for students to cultivate self-confidence, teamwork, leadership, resilience, and lifelong healthy lifestyle habits. Regular participation in physical activity has been associated with improved physical health, enhanced cognitive functioning, reduced stress, and greater academic performance among university students. Consequently, PE serves as an important avenue for fostering holistic development and lifelong engagement in active living.

Despite its recognized benefits, participation in Physical Education remains a challenge for many college students. While PE courses are designed to encourage active involvement, students often encounter barriers

that limit their participation and engagement. Previous studies have identified various personal, social, and environmental factors influencing students' physical activity participation, including low self-confidence, academic workload, inadequate facilities, body image concerns, and lack of motivation (Peng et al., 2023).

Within the Philippine context, research has demonstrated that motivation plays a crucial role in students' participation in physical activities. Martin et al. (2016) found that Filipino college students who possessed higher levels of motivation were more likely to participate actively in physical activities. Similarly, Martin, Santos, and Tubera (2017) reported that students' motivational profiles significantly predicted physical activity participation, suggesting that psychological factors are important determinants of engagement in PE-related activities.

Perceived competence and confidence have likewise emerged as influential factors affecting participation. Santos et al. (2022) revealed that perceived physical competence significantly influenced students' engagement and appreciation of physical activities. Students who believed in their abilities demonstrated greater willingness to participate and perform physical tasks. Likewise, Pestaño et al. (2025) emphasized that supportive coaching environments enhanced self-confidence and self-efficacy among student-athletes, highlighting the importance of positive social support systems in encouraging participation.

Environmental barriers have also been documented among Filipino students. Martin and Santos (2015) identified lack of time, environmental constraints, and personal barriers as significant obstacles to walking participation among college students. Similar challenges may also influence participation in Physical Education classes where students encounter demanding academic schedules, limited facilities, and unfavorable environmental conditions. Furthermore, Martin et al. (2017) noted that lifestyle-related factors, including patterns of physical activity engagement, can influence students' overall participation behaviors.

The importance of social environments has likewise been emphasized in educational research. Studies have shown that supportive relationships, encouragement from peers and teachers, and inclusive learning environments enhance student engagement and participation. Conversely, fear of negative evaluation, social comparison, and anxiety may discourage students from participating actively. This finding is supported by Santos, Cunanan, and Mandap (2021), who demonstrated that anxiety and fear of evaluation significantly affect students' engagement and performance in educational settings.

Recent developments in Philippine Physical Education also emphasize the need for inclusive and equitable learning environments. Santos (2026) argued that contemporary PE programs should address diverse student needs and experiences to promote meaningful participation and engagement. Creating supportive and inclusive PE environments is therefore essential for ensuring that all students can benefit from physical activity regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or previous experiences.

Although previous studies have identified factors associated with physical activity participation, there remains limited qualitative research exploring how college students personally experience and navigate barriers within Physical Education classes. Most existing studies have employed quantitative approaches that measure participation levels rather than examining students' lived experiences. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing responsive PE programs and intervention strategies that address students' actual needs.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore and understand the barriers affecting active participation in Physical Education among college students. By examining students' lived experiences, the study aims to provide deeper insights into the personal, environmental, and social challenges that shape participation in PE classes. The findings may contribute to the development of more inclusive, supportive, and engaging Physical Education programs in higher education institutions.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive phenomenological design. The researchers selected this design because it focuses on understanding and describing the lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon. Specifically, the study explored the barriers that affect the

active participation of college students in Physical Education (PE) classes. The phenomenological approach enabled the researchers to gain deeper insights into how students perceive and experience personal, social, environmental, and academic challenges related to participation in PE activities.

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of ten (10) individuals from state university in the Philippines. The participants were composed of five (5) male students and five (5) female students who are qualified based on the criteria. The participants of the study consisted of college students who were currently enrolled in or had previously taken Physical Education classes in college. The researchers selected participants from different year levels and academic programs to obtain varied perspectives and experiences regarding participation in Physical Education activities. The study utilized purposive sampling in selecting the participants.

Data Collection

Before gathering the data, the researchers first secured permission from the appropriate authorities and obtained the informed consent of the participants. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews through face-to-face interactions depending on the availability and preference of the participants. During the interviews, the researchers used the prepared guide questions while encouraging participants to elaborate on their responses and share personal experiences related to the barriers affecting their participation in PE classes. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected responses. Field notes were also taken to document observations, reactions, and significant statements during the interviews. After data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed carefully before proceeding to data analysis.

Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method used to identify, organize, analyze, and interpret recurring themes or patterns within qualitative data. The researchers followed the six phases of thematic analysis namely: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The interview transcripts were read several times to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' responses and experiences. Significant statements, words, and ideas related to barriers in Physical Education participation were identified and coded. Similar responses were grouped together to form themes that reflected the common experiences of the participants. The identified themes were interpreted carefully to provide a clearer understanding of the personal, environmental, social, and academic barriers that affect students' active participation in Physical Education.

3. Results and Discussion

1. Personal Factors Affecting Participation in PE Activities

The analysis identified three major personal factors that influence students' participation in Physical Education (PE): (1) Lack of Confidence and Fear of Judgment, (2) Physical Fitness and Health Limitations, and (3) Lack of Experience and Skills. These factors affect students' willingness, confidence, and ability to engage actively in PE activities. Participants reported feelings of embarrassment, physical difficulty, and inadequate preparation, which often reduced their motivation to participate.

Theme 1: Lack of Confidence and Fear of Judgment

Many participants felt pressured, shy, and embarrassed whenever they participated in PE classes, especially when surrounded by classmates who were athletes or more skilled in sports. Students often compared themselves with others, causing fear of making mistakes and negative judgment. These feelings affected their confidence and willingness to participate actively during physical activities.

"Naprepressure po ako maipagsabayan sa mga kaklase ko lalo na sa mga athletes." (P1)

(“I feel pressured to keep up with my classmates, especially the athletes.”)
“Parang andon yung shy tas embarrassment during the learning.” (P4)
(“I feel shy and embarrassed during the learning process.”)

These statements showed that students experienced low self-confidence when they felt less capable than their classmates. This finding is supported by Ankori et al. (2022), who found that students often face self-doubt and physical challenges but gradually develop confidence through persistent effort. Fear of embarrassment, social judgment, and making mistakes discouraged students from participating actively in PE activities. Many participants compared themselves with more skilled classmates and athletes, which created feelings of pressure, inferiority, and anxiety. As a result, they became hesitant and uncomfortable participating in class activities. The findings align with Santos et al. (2021), who found that fear of negative evaluation and anxiety often diminish students' confidence and willingness to participate in educational activities. Similarly, Santos et al. (2022) reported that perceived physical competence significantly influences participation and engagement in movement-based learning environments.

Theme 2: Physical Fitness and Health Limitations

Students who lacked regular physical activity, stamina, and physical preparedness often struggled to perform tasks that required endurance, strength, and flexibility. Some participants also mentioned that health conditions and physical discomfort prevented them from fully participating in PE classes.

“Hindi ako ganon ka active sa physical activities so medyo nahihirapan din ako.” (P5)
(“I am not very active in physical activities, so I also find it somewhat difficult.”)
“Pinapahalagahan din po namin yung physical health.” (P7)
(“We also place importance on maintaining physical health.”)

These statements showed that students with limited physical fitness and health concerns experienced difficulty participating in PE activities. Many participants reported low stamina, physical exhaustion, and health-related issues that made it challenging to perform physical tasks and keep up with activities. Consistent with Martin et al. (2016), students who perceived themselves as physically capable demonstrated greater participation in physical activities. Furthermore, Martin et al. (2023) showed that improvements in physical fitness contribute positively to students' health and participation outcomes.

Theme 3. Lack of Experience and Skills

Students had limited background and unfamiliarity with sports and physical activities. Based on participants' experiences, students without prior exposure to sports often felt disadvantaged and less capable in PE classes. Their limited knowledge of rules, techniques, and movements affected their confidence and participation.

“Kapag wala ka namang background or experiences sa any sports sa PE.” (P6)
(“When you do not have any background or experience in any sport in PE.”)
“Sa running or ano po or any sports po hindi namn po ako ganon kagaling” (P7)
(“When it comes in running or any sports, I am not very skilled”)

The statement showed that students without sports experience struggled to participate effectively in PE activities because they lacked familiarity with the required skills and movements (Antalan, 2026). Previous studies on physical activity participation among Filipino students indicate that prior exposure and competence development are important predictors of engagement (Martin et al., 2016; Martin, Santos, & Tubera, 2017).

2. Environmental Factors

The analysis revealed three major environmental barriers affecting students' participation in PE: (1) Extreme Weather Conditions, (2) Overcrowded and Limited Facilities, and (3) Schedule and Academic Workload. These

factors create physical discomfort, restrict movement, and reduce students' motivation and availability for active participation.

Theme 1. *Extreme Weather Conditions*

Students found it difficult to participate in outdoor activities because of extreme heat, excessive sunlight, and physical discomfort caused by high temperatures.

“Sobrang hirap gumalaw kasi ang init.” (P4)

(“It is very difficult to move because of the heat.”)

“Maraming tinatamad samin and hindi po maiiwasan yung sunburn.” (P7)

(“Many of us feel unmotivated, and sunburn is unavoidable.”)

Environmental barriers identified in this study support the findings of Martin and Santos (2015), who reported that external conditions often discourage college students from engaging in physical activities. Many students experienced extreme heat during outdoor classes, making it difficult for them to stay active and focused. They were also aware of the high heat levels, which often caused tiredness, discomfort, and a greater risk of exhaustion. Some students expressed concerns about getting sunburned after spending long periods under direct sunlight, while others reported excessive sweating, dizziness, body fatigue, and difficulty performing physical tasks. These uncomfortable conditions often reduced their interest and motivation to participate in class activities.

Theme 2. *Overcrowded and Limited Facilities*

Students stated that overcrowded areas and limited facilities made movement difficult and uncomfortable during activities.

“Crowded, kaya nakakawalang gana pong makipagparticipate.” (P2)

(“Crowded, that’s why I feel discouraged to participate.”)

“Overcrowded tapos lack of space ayon mahirap gumalaw.” (P5)

(“It is overcrowded and there is a lack of space, making it difficult to move around.”)

The statement showed that overcrowding and the lack of proper facilities made it difficult for students to participate comfortably in Physical Education activities. Local studies reported that the availability and effective utilization of school physical facilities play a significant role in enhancing students’ academic performance, while inadequacy of such physical facilities could contribute to poor academic performance in students (Pascual, 2026; Santos, 2024). Having too many students in the same area often resulted in limited space, making movement and physical performance more challenging. Because of the restricted space, students were not always able to perform activities properly or move freely during class. Participants also pointed out that insufficient equipment, poor ventilation, and unsuitable facilities created additional difficulties. These conditions contributed to an uncomfortable learning environment that affected students’ concentration, participation, and overall learning experience in PE classes. The findings indicate that the physical learning environment plays an important role in promoting active participation in Physical Education.

Theme 3. *Schedule and Academic Workload*

Students struggled to balance school requirements, assignments, and class schedules with participation in physical activities.

“Schedule specially nung pag second sem naming basketball ata yung nagging sport naming tas nataon siya na may heat index kaya sobrang hirap gumalaw.” (P4)

(“In schedule especially in my second sem, our sport was basketball then because of heat index it’s hard to move”)

“Marami pong homework din tapos sunod sunod papo minsan wala napong vacant.” (P8)

("We also have a lot of homework, and sometimes our classes are scheduled back-to-back, leaving us with no free time.")

Academic Pressure and Time Constraints reflected how school-related responsibilities and limited free time affected students' participation in Physical Education activities. According to Wu et al., 2026, Academic workload significantly and negatively affected students' physical health, with each additional academic hour associated with a 0.012-point decrease in physical fitness scores ($p < 0.001$). Participants shared that their busy schedules made it difficult to balance PE classes with academic and personal commitments. They also experienced pressure from assignments, projects, and examinations, which often left them with little energy and motivation to participate. Limited breaks between classes and other activities further reduced the time available for PE, while difficulties in managing their schedules added to the challenge. The findings suggest that academic responsibilities and scheduling concerns reduce students' focus, energy, and willingness to participate actively in Physical Education activities.

3. Social Influences Impact Participation

The findings revealed that social influences significantly affect students' participation in Physical Education (PE) activities. Two major themes emerged: (1) Supportive Peers and Teachers Increase Motivation and (2) Peer Pressure and Social Comparison. Positive encouragement from classmates and teachers enhanced students' confidence and motivation, while social comparison with more skilled peers often led to feelings of intimidation and self-doubt. These findings highlight the important role of the social environment in shaping students' participation in PE.

Theme 1: Peer Pressure and Social Comparison

Students felt intimidated and pressured whenever they compared their abilities with athletes or classmates who performed better in sports and physical activities. Although competition sometimes motivated students to improve, it also created anxiety and self-doubt among those with lower confidence and limited skills.

"Hindi naman po natin maiiwasan na icompare yung sarili natin sa kanila." (P7)

("We cannot avoid to compare ourselves to others.")

"Kapag yung mga kasama mopo is, kunawari (hindi ko kaya to ganon) pati po ikaw mahahawa kana." (P8)

("When classmates said that they cannot do it, then it discouraged me also to do it.")

The statement showed that students naturally compare themselves with others, which affects their confidence and participation during PE activities. For adolescents with lower skill levels or insufficient self-confidence, persistent unfavorable comparisons can easily induce anxiety, frustration, and "learned helplessness," ultimately leading to decreased motivation for sports participation and withdrawal behavior (Manalad et al., 2026). Similar observations were reported by Santos et al. (2021), wherein social evaluation and comparison contributed to anxiety and reduced confidence among students.

Being surrounded by classmates who were more skilled or athletic sometimes creates pressure, making some students feel nervous, uncomfortable, or hesitant to join activities. Differences in ability levels could also lead to feelings of intimidation, which may affect their willingness to participate. At the same time, some students viewed competition as a positive challenge that encourages them to improve their skills, work harder, and perform better during PE classes. The findings revealed that peer influence can have both positive and negative effects on students' participation in Physical Education. While some students become motivated through competition, others experience anxiety and reduced confidence because of social comparison.

4. Coping Strategies

The analysis identified three major coping strategies used by students to overcome barriers in Physical Education: (1) Developing a Positive Mindset and Enjoyment, (2) Practice, Persistence, and Self-Improvement,

and (3) Seeking Inspiration and Social Support. These strategies help students manage challenges, build confidence, and remain engaged in PE activities.

Theme 1. *Developing Positive Mindset and Enjoyment*

Students became more motivated and less stressed whenever they focused on having fun and appreciating the activities rather than worrying about mistakes and difficulties.

“Enjoy lang po yung ginagawa para hindi masyadong ma feel yung pagod.” (P1)

(“Enjoying the activity can help reduce the feeling of fatigue.”)

“Second I’m inspired in watching videos that promotes healthy lifestyle and it motivates me to do the same.” (P6)

The statement showed that enjoyment and positivity helped students reduce stress and physical exhaustion during participation in PE activities. Many students shared that they found happiness, fun, and satisfaction in participating, which made the activities more enjoyable. Having a positive attitude also helped them face challenges and difficulties with confidence. Gerber et al. (2025), noted that shifting a participant's awareness toward task enjoyment can reduce the perceived burden of physical strain, changing an otherwise exhausting exercise into a satisfying experience. This positive outlook encouraged them to stay motivated and continue participating even when they felt tired or faced personal struggles. As a result, enjoyment, motivation, and positive thinking helped reduce feelings of stress, pressure, and discomfort during PE classes.

The findings suggest that maintaining a positive mindset and focusing on enjoyment help students cope with barriers and remain active during Physical Education activities.

Theme 2. *Practice, Persistence, and Self-Improvement*

Students coped with difficulties by practicing regularly, learning from mistakes, and pushing themselves to improve during PE activities.

“Tinatry ko nalang pong praktisin yung mga activity kahit mahirap po kasi walang namang choice na iba.” (P2)

(“I’m trying to practice those activities even it is hard, and I don’t have any choice”)

“Pinapractice ko po para mas gumaling ako at hindi mahirapan.” (P5)

(“I regularly practice to improve my skills and reduce the challenges I face.”)

The statement showed that students use practice and persistence as strategies to overcome their weaknesses and improve participation in PE activities. Juarez (2024), established that introducing a growth mindset into a physical education setting allows students to conceptualize mistakes not as social embarrassments, but as essential data points for future learning. This psychological resilience promotes grit. This finding supports Martin et al. (2016), who emphasized that motivation and continued participation facilitate the development of physical competence and confidence over time. Regular practice helped students improve their physical abilities and develop their skills during PE activities. Many students were motivated by their desire to improve themselves and become more confident in participating in different tasks and exercises. The findings indicate that continuous practice and determination help students gradually improve their confidence, physical abilities, and participation in Physical Education activities.

Theme 3. *Seeking Inspiration and Social Support*

Students emotional support and inspiration from others helped students feel more confident and motivated to participate actively.

“I was able to overcome it through the help of my friends and the people around me.”

“To overcome barriers, I first draw inspiration from classmates who enjoy participating in physical activities.”

The statement demonstrates that students are more motivated to participate in Physical Education when they are encouraged and supported by others. Support from classmates, teachers, and family members helps students gain confidence, minimize their fear of being judged, and feel more comfortable participating in activities. Huang (2024) stated that good relationships and teamwork in PE generate a supportive environment that fosters involvement. As a result, students gain confidence, motivation, and willingness to face challenges during PE activities.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed that active participation in Physical Education is shaped by a complex interaction of personal, environmental, and social factors. Students commonly experienced barriers related to self-confidence, fear of judgment, limited physical fitness, health concerns, inadequate experience, extreme weather conditions, overcrowded facilities, and academic demands. Social influences served both as facilitators and barriers, with supportive peers and teachers enhancing participation while social comparison reduced confidence among some students. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience through positive thinking, persistent practice, and seeking support from significant others. These findings underscore the importance of creating inclusive, student-centered, and supportive Physical Education environments that foster confidence, competence, and meaningful participation. By addressing identified barriers, higher education institutions can strengthen Physical Education programs and encourage lifelong engagement in physical activity among college students.

5. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, Physical Education teachers should foster a positive and friendly atmosphere in which students feel comfortable engaging without fear of judgment or criticism. Schools should make sure that PE classes have sufficient facilities, equipment, and space so that students may participate in activities safely and comfortably. PE activities should also be organized to accommodate student different abilities and fitness levels in order to encourage increased engagement while reducing feelings of difficulty or discouragement. When organizing outdoor activities, schools and teachers should evaluate weather conditions and offer alternate activities on particularly daytime temperatures to ensure student health and safety. Teachers should also encourage teamwork, respect, and positive relationships among students to help them gain confidence and lessen emotions of comparison to others. In addition, students should be encouraged to engage in physical activity outside of school hours in order to enhance their fitness and make PE activities more manageable. Finally, schools should design academic schedules that allow students to balance their studies while actively participating in Physical Education activities.

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