

Fitness in the Digital Age: Students' Experiences with Social Media as a Source of Physical Activity Motivation

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Abstract: Social media has become a common source of information and motivation for students, including content related to physical activity, exercise, sports, and fitness. This study examined students' experiences with social media as a source of physical activity motivation. A qualitative descriptive research design was used with thirteen (13) college students who actively use social media and have encountered fitness- or physical-activity-related content. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and their responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that workout videos, sports content, fitness challenges, and fitness-related posts can motivate students to participate in physical activities and improve their physical abilities. However, unrealistic body standards, difficult workouts, and unhealthy comparisons may discourage participation. Accessible, practical, and engaging content was found to encourage physical activity, while unrealistic fitness content may have negative effects. Participants also suggested that Physical Education teachers can use social media to share workout videos, exercise tutorials, fitness challenges, and educational content. Overall, social media can support physical activity motivation when content is safe, realistic, accessible, and appropriate for students' abilities.

Keywords: Social media, physical activity, motivation, college students, physical education

1. Introduction

Physical activity is essential for health, reducing chronic disease risks and improving psychological well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). However, many young people remain physically inactive, including college students in the Philippines who often depend on physical education classes for activity (Martin et al., 2016; Baligad et al., 2017).

Social media can influence physical activity by providing social support, exercise information, fitness challenges, and personalized feedback. However, it may also promote sedentary behaviors and unrealistic body ideals (Zhuka et al., 2025; Baiga et al., 2023). Studies have shown that social media-based interventions can encourage physical activity through motivation, guidance, and social interaction (Goodyear et al., 2021; Günther et al., 2021).

Despite these findings, Philippine research on social media as a tool for motivating physical activity remains limited. Thus, this study examines how social media influences students' motivation, perceptions, and participation in physical activity within physical education programs.

This study addresses that gap by examining students' experiences with social media as a source of physical activity motivation within the context of physical education. By analyzing how digital platforms influence

perceptions, behaviors, and participation, it seeks to clarify whether social media can serve as an effective tool for promoting active lifestyles among college students in PE programs (WHO, 2020; Zhuka et al., 2025; Baiga et al., 2023). The findings are expected to contribute to digital health literature and provide insights for educators and policymakers in designing culturally relevant strategies that utilize social media as a supportive tool in physical education programs.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to examine students' experiences with social media as a source of physical activity motivation. This design is appropriate because it focuses on clearly describing and interpreting the participants' perspectives, experiences, and perceptions regarding the influence of social media on their exercise behaviors and participation in physical activities. Through this approach, the study aims to present the participants' experiences based on their own responses and identify common patterns and themes from the collected data.

Participants

The participants of this study were thirteen (13) college students who actively use social media and have encountered fitness-related or physical-activity-related content, such as workout videos, fitness challenges, exercise tutorials, sports-related posts, and health or wellness materials. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique used to deliberately select individuals who met the criteria relevant to the study. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled college students, (2) active users of at least one social media platform, (3) have encountered fitness or physical-activity-related content, and (4) willing to share their experiences. The responses of the thirteen (13) participants served as the primary data for identifying codes, categories, and themes related to the influence of social media on physical activity.

Data Collection

The researchers will distribute printed questionnaires containing open-ended questions to the selected college student respondents. Prior to answering, the respondents will be informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for academic research. The printed format was chosen for accessibility and practicality, ensuring that participants can provide detailed written accounts of their experiences. After collecting the responses, the researchers will organize, tabulate, and prepare the data for analysis to determine the students' experiences and perceptions regarding social media as a source of physical activity motivation.

Data Analysis

The researchers will analyze the responses gathered from the college student participants using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This process will involve examining the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding social media as a source of physical activity motivation and organizing the findings into meaningful themes.

The researchers will examine both the positive and negative experiences shared by the participants. Similar responses will be compared, recurring ideas will be identified, and these will be organized into the five themes. The findings will then be interpreted to provide a deeper understanding of how college students experience social media as a source of physical activity motivation.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers will ensure that the study adheres to ethical standards in academic research. Prior to participation, informed consent will be obtained from all respondents, who will be briefed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without

penalty. Confidentiality will be maintained by keeping all responses anonymous and using the data solely for academic purposes.

The researchers will also ensure that no harm comes to the participants by avoiding sensitive or intrusive questions and by respecting their privacy. Data will be securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Ethical approval will be sought from the appropriate institutional review body before the commencement of data collection.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Influence on Exercise Behaviors

Theme 1: Social Media Provides Motivation for Exercise

The participants described social media as a source of motivation to exercise and participate in physical activities. They mentioned that watching workout videos, seeing other people exercise, and being exposed to active lifestyles encourage them to become more physically active.

“by watching into virtual exercise on youtube and tiktok” P1

“by watching video that gives motivation” P2

“exposing myself to workout videos, fitness challenges, and inspiring people” P4

“through workout videos and fitness tips” P5

“seeing friends, athletes or creators post about their routines can inspire people” P6

“watching workout videos in youtube” P7

“i see people sharing their workouts in social media” P9

“Social media platforms has a significant influence on how people interact, especially when it comes to physical activities. By the use of social media, it motivates me to be more productive by watching videos that shows active lifestyle.” P10

“Social media motivates me to exercise by showing workout videos or reels on different platforms. It gives me ideas and encourages me to have an active lifestyle.” P11

“Social media motivates me to exercise because I see other people sharing their workouts and fitness routines. It encourages me to try exercising and become more active.” P12

This finding is supported by Buja et al. (2024), who reviewed studies involving university students and found that interventions using social media or text messaging tended to improve physical activity levels. Out of the 19 studies included in their review, 15 reported improvements in physical activity. The researchers also noted that social components, such as creating social groups, could make these interventions more effective. Similarly, Garcia (2024) found that PE students engage with TikTok fitness videos for different reasons, including motivation, advice, and guidance, and that motivational and fitness-related content can encourage engagement. Therefore, the findings of the present study suggest that social media can serve as an additional source of motivation for students to become physically active.

Theme 2: Social Media Encourages Self-Improvement

Aside from providing motivation, the participants also described social media as a source of ideas and examples that help them improve their physical fitness and abilities. Some participants used the activities and progress of other people as motivation for their own improvement.

“sharing improvement p, by doing physical activities that helps many individual as well” P3

“volleyball activities, i watch those video in order for me to improve” P3

“yes, I compared it always to motivate me to improve my fitness” P1

“i am posting exercise videos so that i can feel more confident” P8

“comparing myself to other content creators, telling myself that i can also do what they can do” P8

“As a volleyball player, sports videos motivates me to be more active.” P10

“Seeing other people stay consistent also encourages me to try and improve myself.” P13

These responses indicate that social media can encourage students to set personal goals and work toward improving their physical abilities. Participant 3, for example, watches volleyball-related videos to improve, while Participants 1 and 8 use what they see online as motivation for their own fitness and confidence. Participant 13 also explained that seeing other people remain consistent encourages her to try and improve herself.

This finding is consistent with Garcia (2024), whose study of 597 PE students found that fitness videos on TikTok can provide motivation, advice, and guidance, with students also showing a tendency to apply exercises and fitness tips learned from the videos. In addition, Buja et al. (2024) found that social-media-based interventions can support physical activity among university students, suggesting that digital platforms can be useful in encouraging students to become more active.

The present findings therefore suggest that social media can function as a source of inspiration for self-improvement, particularly when students use online content as a guide rather than simply comparing themselves with others.

Theme 3: Social Media May Cause Distraction and Negative Feelings

Although most participants described positive effects of social media, some also identified negative experiences. These included distraction, insecurity, pressure, and decreased motivation caused by certain types of fitness-related content.

“content showing unrealistic body standards as it lead to comparison and lower motivation” P4

“yes, it can make me feel insecure and less motivated” P4

“showing unrealistic body standards” P5

“comparing myself to others can sometimes make me feel less motivated” P5

“unrealistic perfect body” P7

“Especially, when I find other videos interesting” P13

“Extreme workouts can discourage me. Sometimes I feel pressured when I see people achieving results very quickly. It can make me feel that my own progress is not enough, even though everyone has a different body and fitness level.” P13

The responses show that social media can have negative effects when students are exposed to unrealistic standards or become distracted by other types of content. Some participants felt insecure or less motivated after comparing themselves with people online. This indicates that the influence of social media on exercise behaviors is not always positive and may depend on the kind of content students encounter.

This finding is supported by Bonfanti et al. (2025), whose systematic review and meta-analysis of 83 studies involving 55,440 participants found a significant association between higher levels of online social comparison and greater body-image concerns. The study also found that higher social comparison was associated with lower positive body image.

Thus, the present findings show that while social media can motivate students to exercise, exposure to unrealistic body standards may also create pressure and reduce confidence. This highlights the importance of consuming fitness content critically and choosing realistic and health-oriented content.

Online Fitness Content and Physical Activity Participation

Theme 1: Workout and Sports Content Encourages Participation

The participants identified different types of fitness and physical activity content that motivate them to become active. Workout videos, sports videos, tutorials, and activity-specific content were commonly mentioned.

“zumba, and i also watch video guides online” P1

“yoga tutorial on youtube” P2

“volleyball activities, i watch those video in order for me to improve” P3

“fitness challenges, because they make exercise look fun” P4

“weight lifting videos and arm wrestling” P8

"through workout videos" P9

"As a volleyball player, sports videos motivates me to be more active." P10

"Workout videos, sports videos, and fitness challenges motivate me because they are easy to follow and give me new ideas for exercise." P11

"Workout videos, fitness challenges, and before-and-after progress posts motivate me the most. They give me ideas about different exercises that I can try." P12

"Workout videos, contemporary activities, fitness challenges, and ballet videos motivate me the most." P13

The responses demonstrate that participants have different interests when it comes to fitness content. Some prefer general workout videos, while others are more interested in specific activities such as volleyball, yoga, Zumba, weightlifting, ballet, and contemporary activities. This suggests that students may be more interested in participating when the content is connected to their personal interests and preferred activities.

Garcia (2024) similarly found that PE students engage with different types of fitness videos on TikTok, particularly content involving fitness tips, motivation, tutorials, and body transformation. The study also found that students may apply exercises and information learned from fitness videos.

The findings therefore suggest that providing varied physical activity content may help students discover activities that match their interests and encourage them to participate.

Theme 2: Accessible and Engaging Content Increases Participation

Participants also emphasized that fitness content is more motivating when it is easy to follow, enjoyable, and practical. Fitness challenges, short tutorials, and simple workout routines were among the content that participants found useful.

"fitness challenges, because they make exercise look fun" P4

"workout routine and fitness challenges motivate me because they are easy to follow" P5

"short workout tutorials, quick fitness challenges, and authentic progress stories are usually the most motivating" P6

"Workout videos, sports videos, and fitness challenges motivate me because they are easy to follow and give me new ideas for exercise." P11

"Teachers can share simple workout videos, fitness challenges, and helpful exercise tips." P12

"Sometimes I save the routine they suggesting and i will do it if I am not busy." P13

The participants' responses indicate that accessibility and enjoyment are important characteristics of motivating fitness content. Content that is easy to understand and follow can give students practical ideas that they can perform on their own. Fitness challenges can also make physical activity more enjoyable and interactive.

Garcia (2024) reported that PE students showed engagement with fitness videos that included tips, motivation, advice, and guidance. Buja et al. (2024) also found that social-media-based approaches can be useful in promoting physical activity among university students, although their effectiveness can vary depending on how the intervention is designed.

These findings support the participants' view that simple, practical, and engaging content can make physical activity easier to approach and more appealing to students.

Theme 3: Unrealistic Fitness Content Discourages Participation

Despite the positive effects of fitness content, participants also identified content that discouraged them from exercising. Unrealistic body standards, perfect bodies, difficult workouts, and extreme fitness goals were commonly mentioned.

"content showing unrealistic body standards as it lead to comparison and lower motivation" P4

"showing unrealistic body standards" P5

"content that promotes unrealistic body standards" P6

"unrealistic perfect body" P7

"unrealistic body goals" P9

"Content that shows good looking bodies or difficult workouts can discourage me. It makes me feel like I am not fit enough or that I am not doing enough." P11

"Some fitness content discourages me when it shows unrealistic body standards or very difficult workouts. Sometimes, I compare myself to people online and feel that I am not fit enough. This can make me lose confidence and motivation." P12

"Extreme workouts can discourage me. Sometimes I feel pressured when I see people achieving results very quickly." P13

The responses show that unrealistic fitness content may create negative perceptions of one's own body and fitness level. Participants may feel that they are not fit enough when they compare themselves with people who appear to have ideal bodies or achieve results quickly. Difficult workouts may also discourage participation when students feel that they cannot perform the same activities.

These findings are strongly supported by Bonfanti et al. (2025), who found a significant relationship between online social comparison and body-image concerns. Their findings suggest that frequent comparison with others online can be associated with poorer body-image outcomes.

Therefore, fitness content should not focus only on physical appearance or unrealistic results. Instead, content that promotes realistic progress, proper exercise, health, and individual differences may be more appropriate for encouraging students to participate in physical activities.

Social Media Use in Promoting Active Lifestyles

Theme 1: Sharing Workout and Educational Content

Participants suggested that teachers can use social media to share workout videos, tutorials, fitness information, and exercise tips. These resources can provide students with guidance that they can access both inside and outside the classroom.

"by sending us physical fitness video for us to be guided on our task" P1

"through sending some video tutorial on messenger" P2

"teacher can use social media to share fun workout videos, fitness challenges and activity tips" P4

"teachers can post simple workouts, challenges and reminders to encourage students to stay active" P5

"share realistic workout videos to students" P7

"Teachers has a big role in every students. They can use social media as platform to share information about how to have active lifestyle." P10

"Teachers can share simple workout videos, exercise challenges, and sports activities on social media." P11

"Teachers can use social media to share simple workout videos, fitness challenges, and helpful exercise tips." P12

"Teachers can use social media to share fun workout videos, fitness challenges, sports activities, and health tips to their students." P13

The responses indicate that participants view social media as a useful extension of the teacher's role. Workout videos and tutorials can provide students with additional guidance when performing physical activities, while health information can help them understand the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle.

This is consistent with Garcia (2024), who emphasized the potential of fitness-related social media content to provide PE students with motivation, advice, guidance, and information that may be applied to physical activities. In addition, Saiz-González et al. (2025) reported that PE teachers showed interest in using digital technology to support learning, physical activity, teaching, communication, and student teamwork.

However, the content shared by teachers should be carefully selected. Since some participants reported being discouraged by unrealistic fitness content, teachers should prioritize content that is safe, realistic, age-appropriate, and suitable for different fitness levels.

Theme 2: Using Fitness Challenges to Encourage Participation

Another common suggestion among the participants was the use of fitness challenges and online activities. Participants believed that these activities could make exercise more interactive and encourage students to participate.

"teacher can use social media to share fun workout videos, fitness challenges and activity tips" P4
"teachers can post simple workouts, challenges and reminders to encourage students to stay active" P5
"sharing fun at home movement challenges, posting educational videos about proper form, and celebrating their students progress" P6
"workout videos, fitness challenges" P9
"Teachers can share simple workout videos, exercise challenges, and sports activities on social media." P11
"Teachers can use social media to share simple workout videos, fitness challenges, and helpful exercise tips. They can also create online activities where students can participate and share their progress." P12
"They can also create challenges where students can participate safely and encourage one another." P13

The responses show that online fitness challenges can make physical activity more engaging by allowing students to actively participate instead of simply watching content. Challenges may also encourage interaction among students and provide them with a simple goal to work toward.

Buja et al. (2024) found that social-media-based interventions can be effective in increasing physical activity among university students, with interventions that included social groups showing greater effectiveness. This supports the participants' suggestions that social media activities should involve interaction and participation. However, the participants also emphasized safety. Therefore, teachers should make sure that online challenges are appropriate for students' abilities and should provide proper instructions, especially for exercises that may cause injury if performed incorrectly.

Theme 3: Sharing Progress and Encouraging Peer Participation

Participants also suggested that social media can be used to encourage students by allowing them to share their activities and progress. They believed that seeing other people participate and improve can motivate students to become active themselves.

"by showing improvements of other people" P3
"letting people post their exercise or habit for other people to be motivated to do the same thing" P8
"sharing fun at home movement challenges, posting educational videos about proper form, and celebrating their students progress" P6
"They can also create online activities where students can participate and share their progress." P12
"They can also create challenges where students can participate safely and encourage one another." P13

The participants' responses indicate that social media can create opportunities for peer encouragement and recognition of progress. Sharing improvements may motivate students to participate because they can see that other students are also making an effort to stay active.

This finding is consistent with Buja et al. (2024) and Santos et al. (2022), who found that social-media-based physical activity interventions can be more effective when social groups are included. It also supports the findings of Garcia (2024), which showed that PE students use fitness-related social media content not only for entertainment but also for motivation, advice, and guidance.

However, sharing progress should be handled carefully. Since some participants experienced insecurity from comparing themselves with others, teachers should focus on effort, improvement, participation, and healthy habits, rather than ranking students based on appearance or physical performance. This can help create a more positive use of social media for physical activity.

4. Conclusion

The findings showed that social media can motivate students to become physically active. Workout videos, fitness challenges, sports content, and fitness-related posts give students ideas, motivation, and guidance that encourage them to exercise and improve their physical fitness. However, the findings also showed that not all fitness content has a positive effect, since unrealistic body standards, extreme workouts, and comparing themselves with others can make students feel insecure, pressured, and less motivated. Some participants also shared that social media can be distracting when they come across other types of content that are not related to physical activity. The findings further showed that teachers can use social media to encourage students to

participate in physical activities by sharing simple workout videos, fitness challenges, exercise tips, and other helpful fitness content. Overall, social media can be a useful tool for promoting physical activity when it is used properly and when the content is safe, realistic, and easy to follow. Students can also benefit from using social media by focusing on their own progress and developing healthy habits instead of comparing themselves with others.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings, Physical Education teachers are encouraged to use social media to motivate students to engage in physical activities. They can share simple exercises, sports tutorials, and fitness activities that are safe, realistic, and appropriate for students' abilities. Teachers should also carefully choose the fitness content they share and avoid content that promotes unrealistic body standards or expectations. Students should be encouraged to use social media responsibly, avoid unhealthy comparisons, and critically evaluate fitness information they see online. Further research may be conducted to examine the effects of social media on physical activity among different groups of students and across various social media platforms.

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