

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Unveiling meaning in movement: A phenomenological study on students' physical activity preferences

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Abstract

Background: Physical inactivity has become a pressing global concern, posing significant risks to public health. University students, in particular, experience a marked decline in physical activity (PA) levels as they transition to independent living, often due to motivational, social, and environmental barriers. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education has introduced the Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATHFit) program to address this concern by offering diverse activity options based on student preferences. **Objective:** This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of PATHFit students, focusing on how they derive meaning from their PA choices. **Methods:** A phenomenological research design was employed, utilizing exploratory, semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively selected participants (six males and six females) from various PATHFit 4 classes, including volleyball, basketball, arnis, badminton, dance sports, and traditional games. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify patterns and essential themes from participants' experiences. **Results:** The analysis revealed five essential themes: (1) building confidence and social skills through active participation, (2) gaining understanding through meaningful participation, (3) developing self-belief over time through practice and self-awareness, (4) balancing identity, peer pressure, and cultural influences in sports, and (5) overcoming personal, social, and time barriers to participation. These themes highlighted that students' PA preferences were shaped by intrinsic motivation, peer relationships, cultural identity, and the perceived challenges and rewards of participation. **Conclusions:** Findings underscore the importance of offering diverse, culturally relevant physical activities that foster skill development, confidence, and social connection. The study provides evidence-based insights for refining PATHFit curriculum guidelines to ensure inclusivity and sustained engagement among students. Strengthening support structures and accommodating students' varying needs and interests can contribute to higher PA levels, ultimately advancing health and wellness in higher education.

Keywords: physical activity, thematic analysis, preference, physical education

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of physical inactivity has emerged as a global concern, as it poses substantial risks to public health (Dumith et al., 2011). Specifically, people encounter distinct challenges in sustaining regular physical activity, often influenced by factors such as insufficient social support, lack of personal motivation, weather, and time constraints (Litt et al., 2011; Power et al., 2011; Vetrovsky et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges is essential, as physical inactivity can worsen existing health issues and contribute to the development of functional limitations (Booth et al., 2012). Fortunately, a number of research studies highlighted the well-established advantages of regular physical activity. Studies have demonstrated that participating in physical activity helps prevent weight gain, enhances overall quality of life, and improves physical fitness (Brach et al., 2004; Rýzková et al., 2018; Šmída et al., 2018; Urbanova & Labudova, 2010).

Consistent engagement in physical activity (PA) plays a vital role in promoting a healthy lifestyle, even among

university and college students, offering both immediate and long-term health benefits (Hilland et al., 2009). The transition to higher education has negatively affected the PA behaviors and motivation of many students, contributing to a growing PA crisis in European universities and leading to health problems among recent student generations due to insufficient levels of PA (Podstawski et al., 2021). According to Bray and Born (2004), one-third of students who were physically active during high school became insufficiently active after entering university life. Hence, university students who start living independently often undergo shifts in their lifestyle habits, attitudes, and social roles (Li et al., 2009). This period of transition tends to negatively impact their PA behavior and motivation, resulting in a marked decrease in their overall PA levels (Kwan et al., 2012; Podstawski et al., 2013).

Reforms in higher education aimed to transform tertiary institutions by redefining their goals and responsibilities, with the intention of effectively enhancing the PA levels of students in academe (Muszkieta et al., 2019). Martin et al. (2016) suggested the need for a paradigm

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shift among Physical Education teachers, requiring them to adopt innovative teaching practices that accommodate individual differences by taking into account students' skill levels, readiness, and preferences. Higher education aims to develop active, intellectually well-rounded individuals equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for ongoing personal development, including in PA and health promotion. Beyond imparting knowledge, physical education plays a crucial role in shaping the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that support a healthy lifestyle. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education issued new policies, standards, and guidelines for the implementation of Tertiary Physical Education, specifically Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATHFit), through CHED Memorandum Order No. 39, series of 2021. Notably, for PATHFit 3 and 4, the memorandum grants higher education institutions the flexibility to offer a diverse selection of activities such as dance, sports, martial arts, group exercises, and outdoor or recreational pursuits, allowing them to tailor programs that align with students' needs, interests, and preferences.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of PATHFit 4 students using an exploratory phenomenological approach, focusing on how they uncover and make sense of the meaningful aspects of their PA preferences. The findings of this study will serve as a vital resource for evaluating the effectiveness of the current CHED Memorandum Order on PATHFit implementation. By shedding light on the lived experiences and personal insights of students regarding their PA preferences, the study offers evidence-based recommendations that can guide policymakers in refining and enhancing the PATHFit curriculum. These insights will help ensure that the program remains relevant, inclusive, and aligned with the diverse needs, motivations, and interests of students, ultimately promoting sustained engagement in PA and contributing to the broader goals of health and wellness in higher education.

Methods

Study design

The researcher employed an exploratory phenomenological method. This approach according to Creswell (2013), aimed to elucidate the shared meaning of a concept or phenomenon through the lived experiences of several individuals, concentrating on the essence of those experiences.

Additionally, interviews are usually carried out with individuals possessing direct experience with an event, situation, or phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

From an exploratory phenomenological perspective, Wojnar and Swanson (2007) emphasize that phenomenology seeks to uncover and describe the meaning of lived experiences as perceived by individuals who have directly encountered a particular phenomenon. The approach is concerned not merely with observable behavior, but with how people interpret and make sense of their experiences within a given context. Applied to this study, exploratory phenomenology is appropriate because it allows for an exploration of students' subjective perspectives on their PA

preferences. Through examining their lived experiences in PATHFit classes, students can articulate the meanings they attach to participation, motivation, and difficulty. These accounts provide rich insight into the challenges and barriers they encounter, thereby revealing essential elements of their educational and PA experiences.

Study participants

The participants of this study were purposively selected from the PATHFit 4 classes during the second semester of the Academic Year 2024–2025, specifically after they had completed the course to ensure they could meaningfully reflect on and share their lived experiences based on their preferred physical activities. The participants were drawn from various PA classes, including volleyball, basketball, arnis, badminton, dance sports, and traditional games, representing a diverse range of PA options offered under the PATHFit curriculum. Arnis, the national martial art of the Philippines, is a stick-based combat system that primarily uses rattan sticks and emphasizes discipline, coordination, and self-defense skills. In addition, the study incorporates selected Philippine traditional games, such as *piko*, *Bukidnon sagakad*, and *Chinese garter*, which are commonly played during childhood. These games are included not only as cultural practices worth preserving, but also as meaningful forms of PA that promote an active lifestyle. Integrating these indigenous games highlights their value in fostering movement, social interaction, and cultural continuity among learners.

To capture gender-specific perspectives and acknowledge the varied experiences of male and female students, two participants (one male and one female) were selected from each class, resulting in a total of 12 participants from six classes, which were randomly selected from the class list to minimize selection bias while ensuring gender balance. Each PATHFit 4 class consisted of approximately 35–40 students. The participants were undergraduate students aged between 19 to 22 years old, representing a typical age range for PATHFit 4 enrollees. All participants were currently enrolled in the course during the semester of data collection and had prior exposure to structured physical education activities. The balanced gender representation and randomized selection within each class strengthened the credibility of the sample by allowing for diverse viewpoints while maintaining fairness in participant recruitment. This sampling approach aimed to provide a deeper, more inclusive understanding of the PA preferences and lived experiences of PATHFit 4 students.

Data collection and ethical consideration

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained ethics clearance from one of the accredited institutions under the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (control no. DDOSC10422025). Participants were thoroughly oriented about the purpose and scope of the study, and it was clearly emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary. To ensure ethical compliance, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form as a formal indication of their willingness to take part in the research.

Data were gathered through exploratory interviews using a semi-structured, researcher-developed questionnaire aligned with the study's objectives. Each interview lasted approximately 7 to 10 minutes. While this duration may appear brief for a phenomenological inquiry, it was deemed sufficient to capture the participants' focused and meaningful reflections on their lived experiences related to their preferred physical activities. According to Kallio et al. (2016), the richness of qualitative data depends more on the clarity of the questions and the relevance of the participants' experiences than on the interview duration. In this study, participants were familiar and comfortable with the researcher, which facilitated concise yet substantive responses. Furthermore, data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged after successive interviews, confirming adequacy of the duration (Guest et al., 2006). To ensure accuracy and capture the nuances of the responses, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the exploratory interview. Thematic analysis focuses on classifying, examining, and documenting patterns or themes within the data. These themes represent patterns across data sets that are crucial for unfolding a phenomenon and are linked to a specific research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

During the thematic analysis process, the researcher primarily read and re-read the transcripts to gain an understanding of the data. The data were then ordered to create initial codes, breaking down ideas into smaller, meaningful segments. These codes were examined and grouped together based on common themes. Themes were shaped, reviewed, adjusted, and refined as necessary. Each theme exhibited unity and uniqueness from the others. Finally, the identified themes were defined to elucidate their significance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, inter-rater reliability (coder validation) was incorporated into the process. An additional coder independently reviewed a portion of the transcripts and applied the

coding framework. The coding outcomes were then compared, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This collaborative validation process helped to reduce researcher bias, strengthen consistency in interpretation, and ensure that the identified themes accurately represented the data.

Results

The researcher identified 5 essential themes and 17 sub-themes on the lived experiences of PATHFit students as presented in Table 1 through thematic analysis.

Building confidence and social skills through active participation

Participants described how engaging in their preferred physical activities fostered both confidence and social connectedness. Initially, many perceived the activities as challenging due to the need to learn new skills and adapt to unfamiliar movements. However, as they progressed, collaborative participation and peer encouragement became key sources of motivation and growth.

For instance, one arnis student shared, "I was amazed while learning arnis in PATHFit 4 for the first time, and that was a meaningful experience. From the practical lessons at the start of the semester to the sinawali and anyo activities by midterms, the journey was truly impactful and even more rewarding when we won first place in the finals." This reflection illustrates how mastery experiences – achieved through practice and achievement – nurtured self-efficacy and pride, echoing Bandura's (2013) concept that confidence develops through successful performance experiences.

Similarly, a dance sport student reflected, "My experience turned out to be really great, even though I didn't fully like dance sport at first. But with the help of our instructor, who taught us properly, my skills were refined throughout the sessions. So overall, it was a big help – especially with our instructor's guidance during our practices." This account highlights the significance of guided instruction and social support, reinforcing the notion that teacher encouragement enhances both skill acquisition and self-belief (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Table 1 Lived experiences of PATHFit students with regard to their physical activity preferences

Essential themes	Subthemes
Building Confidence and Social Skills Through Active Participation	Emerging Confidence Through Challenge and Support Motivation and Learning Through Sport Preferences and Adaptability Building Relationships and Inclusivity through Team Sports
Gaining Understanding Through Meaningful Participation	Foundations of Physical Literacy and Emerging Skill Mastery Knowledge Deepening Through Meaningful Learning Experiences Boosting Confidence Through Cognitive Engagement and Experience
Developing Self-belief Over Time Through Practice and Self-Awareness	Confidence Built Through Foundational Skills and Repeated Practice Variable Self-Belief Influenced by Cognitive and Emotional Factors Low Engagement and Knowledge as Barriers to Confidence Established Self-Belief from Experience or Skill Competency
Balancing Identity, Peer Pressure, and Cultural Influence in Sports	Intrinsic Motivation and Purposeful Sport Selection Social and Peer Influence as Catalysts for Engagement Navigating Social Pressure with Self-Awareness and Resilience Fostering Cultural Identity and Community Through Physical Activities
Overcoming Personal, Social, and Time Barriers to Participation	Overcoming Physical Limitations and Self-doubt Managing Emotional Pressures and Strengthening Social Bonds Balancing Academic Demands and Sports Involvement

Another participant from the traditional games group expressed, “Ahmm, it was fun. I learned a lot, and the most important thing I learned was about teamwork and encouraging one another.” This narrative underscores how peer collaboration promoted social bonding and mutual respect – an essential component of confidence-building through active participation.

Collectively, these accounts reveal that confidence emerged not merely from physical skill development but from *social affirmation* within group activities. The shared experiences of success, guidance, and camaraderie transformed initial apprehension into a sense of belonging and competence. Thus, the theme *Building Confidence and Social Skills Through Active Participation* encapsulates how structured physical engagement in PATHFit provided both psychosocial and emotional growth opportunities for students.

Gaining understanding through meaningful participation

Participants expressed that engaging in their preferred physical activities not only enhanced their technical skills but also deepened their understanding and appreciation of the activity itself. Meaningful participation allowed them to translate abstract concepts into practical experiences, which gradually built their confidence and sense of competence.

As one dance sport student reflected, “My interest in dance sport wasn’t that deep since it’s not really my genre. However, with the help of our instructor, it wasn’t a bad experience at all. Now, after our culminating activity, I can say that I have gained a solid understanding and acquired valuable knowledge related to this field.” This reflection demonstrates a transformation from limited interest to genuine engagement through guided learning. The student’s acknowledgment of mentorship underscores the importance of scaffolding and feedback in fostering competence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

Similarly, a Volleyball student shared, “Honestly, I really had no idea at first. But now, little by little, I’ve started to learn some things.” This sentiment illustrates the process of experiential learning, where understanding emerges progressively through active involvement and reflection. It also reflects Kolb’s (2014) experiential learning cycle, emphasizing how concrete experiences and gradual practice shape one’s cognitive and skill-based growth.

A basketball student added, “It somehow helped deepen my understanding of basketball. It made me more aware of the important things to consider when playing the sport.” This insight highlights a shift from surface-level participation to conscious awareness and strategic understanding, suggesting that the activity fostered not only physical improvement but also analytical thinking about gameplay.

Collectively, these narratives reveal that confidence and understanding were cultivated through learning by doing, an authentic engagement that allowed students to internalize concepts through practice, reflection, and guidance. Meaningful participation thus served as both an educational and empowering experience, reinforcing that skill mastery

and self-assurance develop through active, reflective, and socially supported learning contexts.

Developing self-belief over time through practice and self-awareness

Participants revealed that their self-trust in physical activities evolved gradually and was influenced by both cognitive and emotional factors. At the outset, many expressed self-doubt, low engagement, or limited knowledge, which initially constrained their sense of competence. However, as they gained experience and awareness of their capabilities, their confidence improved, underscoring the role of persistence and reflective learning in building self-belief.

One traditional game student shared, “On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d say I’m around 5 to 6. I’m honestly not that into physical activities – I tend to be lazy when it comes to those things.” This illustrates a realistic self-assessment of motivation and readiness, reflecting the early stages of self-efficacy development where awareness of personal limitations precedes growth (Bandura, 2013). Such acknowledgment of one’s starting point forms a foundation for eventual improvement through consistent effort.

Similarly, an arnis student admitted, “I get distracted easily, and I also have trouble remembering the stances, strikes, and other techniques.” This comment reflects the cognitive struggle inherent in acquiring new skills. It shows that self-awareness of difficulties can act as a motivator for intentional practice and focused learning, supporting the principles of metacognition in skill development (Flavell, 1979).

Another participant shared, “I’m only halfway confident for now – I don’t feel fully eligible yet since I’m still new to this.” This sentiment exemplifies transitional confidence, where learners recognize progress while acknowledging room for growth. It highlights the dynamic nature of self-efficacy, which strengthens through repeated successful performance and positive reinforcement (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021).

Taken together, these reflections portray confidence as a process rather than a fixed state. Through practice, reflection, and gradual mastery, participants began to internalize a stronger sense of self-belief. Their experiences affirm that confidence develops not instantly but incrementally – nurtured through awareness of one’s learning journey, perseverance in practice, and constructive feedback from teachers and peers.

Balancing identity, peer pressure, and cultural influence in sports

Participants revealed that their involvement in physical activities was shaped by a delicate balance between personal identity, cultural belonging, and social expectations. Their engagement reflected not only intrinsic motivation but also the influence of peers and broader cultural values that shaped how they perceived and pursued their chosen sports.

A traditional game student shared, “I noticed that many chose to transfer to volleyball or basketball because those sports usually get more attention. But I chose to stay with

traditional games because I believe that if we play and enjoy them, others will also be encouraged to choose them. These traditional games are part of our culture, so we should truly value and love them.” This statement reflects a strong sense of cultural identity and agency in resisting popular trends. The student’s decision to remain with traditional games highlights autonomous motivation – engaging in an activity aligned with personal and cultural values rather than external approval (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It also reflects the preservation of cultural heritage as an empowering expression of self-determination.

Conversely, a volleyball student noted, “At first, I thought it was a sport only for females, but I eventually realized that boys can also join and enjoy it.” This demonstrates a shift in perspective that challenges gendered stereotypes and expands the participant’s sense of identity. Such reflections indicate an evolving awareness of inclusivity and self-expression, consistent with Erikson’s (1959) view that identity formation involves questioning and redefining social norms.

Similarly, a badminton student shared, “I felt even more uplifted and motivated, especially because of the support and encouragement from others. It made me want to practice even more and improve in that sport.” This emphasizes the constructive side of peer influence – how social support fosters motivation and persistence. Peer affirmation functions as a positive reinforcer, strengthening both engagement and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2013).

However, social influence was not always empowering. One volleyball student expressed, “Actually, I really felt like they wanted me to join even if I wasn’t that skilled yet. It’s like they were expecting me to step up – saying I should be the next one to play because they assumed we already knew how. So yeah, I think I would really feel pressured if ever I get the chance to play.” This reveals the tension between self-expectation and external pressure. While encouragement can motivate, it can also lead to performance anxiety when tied to perceived social expectations – illustrating the dual nature of peer pressure (Festinger, 1954).

Collectively, these narratives illustrate how participants continually negotiate their identities within overlapping cultural and social contexts. Their experiences underscore that confidence and motivation in sports are not merely personal outcomes but are socially and culturally constructed. Balancing one’s authentic interest, social belonging, and cultural pride enabled participants to engage meaningfully in physical activities while developing resilience against external pressures.

Overcoming personal, social, and time barriers to participation

Participants’ experiences revealed how engagement in sports and physical activities often meant confronting a range of challenges like personal insecurities, social pressures, and time constraints. Yet, these barriers also became opportunities for growth, self-awareness, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships.

A traditional game student admitted, “Aside from being a bit lazy, I also struggle with confidence – that’s why I play

as a way to face my fears first. That’s really what it’s about for me.” This reflection encapsulates the use of sport as a medium for self-transformation. The act of participation was not merely physical but deeply psychological, a means to confront and gradually overcome internal limitations. According to Bandura’s (2013) self-efficacy theory, such mastery experiences play a critical role in enhancing one’s belief in their own capabilities, turning self-doubt into self-assurance.

Time management also emerged as a significant challenge. As one arnis student expressed, “Sometimes it’s the unmanageable time that makes it difficult. Also, I don’t really have much experience with this kind of activity, so it has really been a personal challenge for me – something that pushed me to challenge myself.” This highlights the balancing act between academic commitments and physical participation. Rather than discouragement, however, the student’s narrative reflects resilience and adaptive coping, an embodiment of what Ryan and Deci (2000) describe as autonomous motivation, where individuals persist because they find personal meaning in the struggle.

Emotional resilience was likewise tested in the face of performance setbacks. A badminton student shared, “It’s hard, especially when you feel like you’re the reason for the team’s defeat. That’s really a challenge for me.” This illustrates the emotional weight of responsibility in team-based activities. Yet, within that discomfort lies a learning moment, an awareness of accountability and empathy that deepens social connectedness. Goleman’s (2001) emotional intelligence framework helps explain how such reflective experiences contribute to emotional maturity and perseverance.

Interpersonal conflict also surfaced as part of the social barrier to participation. A basketball student remarked, “I think the main challenge for me is unity within our class – especially with some of the girls, since they only start practicing seriously at the last minute. Also, our instructor tends to assign me to help them, so I still end up being the one assisting others. That’s something I struggle with, especially since I still have a bit of an issue with controlling my temper.” This situation reflects the social complexity of teamwork, where collaboration sometimes demands emotional regulation and role adjustment. As Vygotsky (1978) suggested, learning and growth often occur through social interaction; here, the student’s ability to navigate tension becomes an implicit form of socio-emotional learning.

Collectively, these accounts portray participation not as a seamless process but as a continuous negotiation between internal motivation, external pressure, and contextual demands. Through their experiences, participants demonstrated that growth in sports is not merely measured by physical improvement but by the capacity to endure, adapt, and find balance amid life’s competing priorities.

Discussion

Through a comprehensive thematic analysis of the lived experiences of PATHFit students, five essential themes emerged that encapsulate their perspectives, motivations,

and challenges in engaging with their preferred physical activities. These themes provide a deeper understanding of how students derive meaning from their participation and highlight the factors that influence their confidence, social connections, and sustained involvement in PA.

Results in the context of other literature

The first theme, *Building Confidence and Social Skills Through Active Participation*, reflects how collaborative engagement fostered interpersonal relationships and enhanced self-assurance among PATHFit students. These findings are consistent with the study of Vičar (2018), which revealed that the level of self-confidence, goal-setting, and commitment among Czech athletes varied according to their performance level. However, the current study extends this knowledge by situating confidence-building not only within athletic performance but also within classroom-based physical education settings. This suggests that structured yet inclusive environments like PATHFit can serve as social platforms where confidence is co-constructed through teamwork, peer feedback, and shared success.

Unlike Vičar's participants, who were mostly competitive athletes, the PATHFit students gained confidence through participatory learning, underscoring that confidence can emerge even in non-competitive and culturally contextualized programs. Moreover, the theme supports the findings of Bundy et al. (2017), who demonstrated that structured play environments can enhance children's engagement and social development. Their cluster-randomized trial in Australian primary schools showed that introducing open-ended play materials increased PA and expanded opportunities for meaningful peer interaction. Such environments promote collaboration and creativity, which are closely linked to confidence and social competence. Similarly, the PATHFit setting in the present study served as an enabling space where participatory activities strengthened interpersonal connections and self-assurance. Together, these findings suggest that well-designed PA contexts contribute not only to movement outcomes but also to psychosocial development.

The second theme, *Gaining Understanding Through Meaningful Participation*, highlights how meaningful experiences and skill acquisition deepened students' knowledge and boosted their confidence. This result corroborates the findings of Valentine (2017), who emphasized that participation is most meaningful and worthwhile when it aligns with an individual's personal purpose. Yet, this study extends Valentine's argument by demonstrating that meaning-making can also be socially constructed through peer interaction and teacher facilitation. While Valentine focused on individual motivation, the PATHFit students' experiences show that collective experiences, such as shared practice and mutual encouragement, enhance both personal confidence and group cohesion. Thus, meaningful participation in this context is not purely self-referential but relational, merging personal growth with social belonging. Moreover, Kostianen et al. (2018) highlight that thoughtfully designed courses play a critical role in fostering meaningful learning by creating

purposeful opportunities for active engagement. Providing opportunities for strong, experience-based involvement enables deeper understanding. At the same time, meaningful participation also allows space for both positive and uncomfortable emotions, which together contribute to richer and more transformative learning.

The third theme, *Developing Self-belief Over Time Through Practice and Self-Awareness*, emphasizes the role of consistent practice and reflection in strengthening self-belief. This finding aligns with Siswanto et al. (2024), who highlighted that self-belief and self-awareness are critical psychological factors influencing success, particularly in academic settings. However, the current study adds nuance by illustrating how self-awareness in PA extends beyond performance evaluation. It involves recognizing personal limitations, setting realistic goals, and embracing gradual progress. While Siswanto et al. framed self-awareness as a cognitive process, PATHFit students experienced it as both embodied and reflective, revealing that physical movement itself can catalyze self-realization and emotional growth. Additionally, Pajares and Schunk (2002) emphasized that children's beliefs about their physical abilities, competence, and bodily identity significantly shape their engagement, persistence, and preferences in PA settings. Historically grounded in psychological and educational theory, the findings underscore that self-beliefs are central to how children think, feel, and perform, making them particularly influential in determining whether children view themselves as "athletic," "capable," or "not good at sports."

The fourth theme, *Balancing Identity, Peer Pressure, and Cultural Influence in Sports*, illustrates how students navigated cultural ties and social expectations while selecting their preferred activities. This aligns with Graupensperger et al. (2018), who found that athletes with stronger social identities are more susceptible to peer influence. Yet, this study complicates that relationship by showing that peer influence among PATHFit students can function as both a pressure and a protective factor. While some participants felt compelled to conform to popular sports like basketball and volleyball, others intentionally chose traditional games to preserve cultural heritage. Thus, the findings both confirm and extend Graupensperger et al.'s (2018) framework, suggesting that social identity processes in collectivist contexts like the Philippines may promote cultural resilience rather than conformity. In this sense, cultural values act as a counterbalance to peer pressure, reinforcing pride, tradition, and authenticity in sport selection. Similarly, MacPherson et al. (2016) revealed that sport peers play a significant role in shaping athletes' identity development across psychological, social, and physical dimensions. Interactions within sport contexts, whether through supportive friendships, negative peer dynamics, or the broader team environment, actively contribute to how athletes perceive themselves and their place within the sporting culture. Friendships can foster confidence, belonging, and positive self-concept, while negative relationships and peer pressure may challenge athletes' self-perceptions and influence their behaviors, attitudes, and performance. The team context, shaped by shared norms and cultural expectations, further

mediates how athletes negotiate their identities. Together, these dynamics highlight that identity development in sport is not formed in isolation but emerges through the complex process of balancing personal self-concept with peer influence and the cultural environment of sport.

Finally, the fifth theme, *Overcoming Personal, Social, and Time Barriers to Participation*, underscores the strategies students used to manage physical limitations, academic demands, and emotional challenges to remain engaged in PA. This resonates with Beggs et al. (2005), who found that although college students face multiple barriers to participation, these do not necessarily preclude involvement. However, the present findings move beyond this by revealing the adaptive and transformative nature of these coping mechanisms. PATHFit students not only managed constraints but reinterpreted them as opportunities for personal growth and resilience-building. In contrast to Beggs et al. (2005), who framed barriers mainly as external constraints, this study shows that barriers can also be internal catalysts for persistence, character development, and emotional maturity, especially when supported by empathetic instructors and peer networks. In addition, Rauff and Kumazawa (2024) highlighted the critical role of motivation and self-efficacy in sustaining engagement in PA. Students who met PA guidelines demonstrated significantly stronger motives related to fitness and health management, appearance and weight management, and stress and mood regulation, suggesting that personally meaningful reasons for participation help individuals overcome common internal barriers such as low motivation or competing priorities. Moreover, students meeting PA guidelines reported higher self-efficacy across all PA barriers, indicating greater confidence in their ability to remain active despite challenges such as time constraints, social pressures, or environmental obstacles. This underscores self-efficacy as a key mechanism in navigating and overcoming participation barriers.

Collectively, these findings confirm prior scholarship on confidence, motivation, and social influence in PA while also extending theoretical understanding by situating them in a culturally grounded, non-competitive educational environment. The PATHFit experience highlights that students' participation is not simply about physical engagement but about identity formation, cultural continuity, and psychosocial resilience. Hence, this study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing that the benefits of PA extend far beyond fitness; they encompass holistic development shaped by social context, meaning-making, and the transformative potential of lived experience.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. The small sample size of twelve participants restricts the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative approach provided rich and in-depth perspectives, the results may not represent the broader student population with diverse experiences and engagement levels. Additionally, the scope of the study was limited to a single institution, which may have influenced the outcomes due to its unique context, culture, and implementation of the PATHFit program. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution when applied to other academic settings. Future research

should broaden its scope by including multiple institutions or regions to enable comparative analysis and enhance representativeness. Employing mixed-methods designs could further strengthen future studies by combining qualitative insights with quantitative data on motivation, confidence, and participation levels. Likewise, longitudinal approaches are recommended to examine how students' confidence and engagement evolve. Expanding future investigations beyond a single institutional context will not only validate the present findings but also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PATHFit and similar programs foster students' holistic development and lifelong participation in PA.

Further, the study has a relatively short duration of the interviews. Compared to many phenomenological investigations, which often rely on extended, in-depth conversations to uncover layered meanings of lived experience, the shorter interview format may have constrained the depth of exploration. While the interviews were sufficient to capture key perspectives, longer engagement could have allowed participants to elaborate further on their experiences, potentially yielding richer descriptions.

Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of PATHFit students and identified five essential themes that shape their engagement in PA: building confidence, meaningful participation, consistent practice, navigating social and cultural influences, and overcoming barriers. The findings highlight that students are more likely to sustain participation when activities align with their interests, cultural identity, and social networks while providing opportunities for skill development and self-growth.

These results suggest that higher education institutions and physical education instructors should offer diverse, culturally relevant activities and create supportive environments that help students balance academic demands and personal challenges. By centering students' motivations and experiences, programs like PATHFit can foster lifelong engagement in PA and promote overall well-being.

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Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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