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BARRIERS AND BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO UNIVERSITY AND SCHOOL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: Physical activity (PA) is widely acknowledged for its numerous health benefits, yet participation rates among university students and adolescents remain suboptimal. This paper examines the barriers and benefits to physical activity from a multidisciplinary perspective, focusing on university students and adolescents aged 14–19 years. Drawing on a range of studies, the article explores psychological, sociocultural, and environmental factors that either facilitate or inhibit physical activity engagement. Key themes include the impact of psychological factors such as enjoyment and motivation, the role of gender and social norms, and the importance of educational and environmental support structures. Through synthesizing findings from various scholarly works, the paper highlights the necessity of tailored interventions that promote inclusive, enjoyable, and accessible physical activity opportunities to improve engagement. The article concludes with recommendations for enhancing physical activity participation, suggesting both individual level strategies and systemic policy changes to create a more supportive environment for young individuals to engage in regular physical activity.

Keywords: Physical activity, students, barriers, benefits, motivation, physical education.

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity (PA) plays a critical role in promoting overall health and well-being. It is essential for reducing the risk of chronic diseases, improving mental health, enhancing cognitive function, and fostering social connections. Despite these well-documented benefits, participation in physical activity remains low among university students and adolescents, with numerous factors inhibiting engagement. In particular, university students and adolescents aged 14–19 years face unique challenges related to time constraints, motivation, gender expectations, and socio-economic factors which often result in low PA participation rates (Alkhaldeh et al., 2024; Kozleva, Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2021b).

METHODOLOGY

This article explores both the barriers and benefits associated with physical activity in this demographic, providing a multidisciplinary analysis of the psychological, sociocultural, and environmental

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factors that influence engagement. Through a review of the current literature, the paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of why young individuals may not engage in physical activity and how these barriers can be overcome. Furthermore, it highlights the broad-ranging benefits of PA, emphasizing the importance of promoting physical activity among university students and adolescents in order to improve their physical, mental, and social well-being.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical framework

Various theoretical models have been employed to understand the complex dynamics of physical activity behavior, particularly in young individuals. One such framework is the **Anderson Behavioral Model**, which identifies both personal and environmental factors as crucial determinants of PA engagement (Badarali, Rungsihirunrat, 2024). According to this model, barriers to participation may include factors such as lack of time, motivation, and financial resources, while facilitators include social support, environmental cues, and accessible opportunities for engagement. This model emphasizes the importance of addressing both individual and external factors when promoting physical activity.

Another relevant framework is the **Self-Determination Theory** (SDT) which posits that intrinsic motivation is key to sustained engagement in physical activity (Limani, 2024a; Limani, 2024b). SDT suggests that when individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, they are more likely to engage in physical activity for intrinsic reasons, enjoyment or personal growth, for instance. This intrinsic motivation is often more sustainable than extrinsic factors, such as external rewards or social pressures, making it a key focus for intervention strategies aimed at increasing physical activity (Limani, 2023).

By combining insights from both models, a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence physical activity participation in young people emerges. These frameworks also provide practical guidance for developing targeted interventions to promote sustained and meaningful engagement in physical activity.

Barriers to physical activity participation

While the benefits of physical activity are widely acknowledged, numerous barriers prevent university students and adolescents from engaging in regular PA. These barriers can be broadly categorized into psychological, sociocultural, and environmental factors.

Psychological and Motivational Barriers

Psychological factors including low self-efficacy, fear of failure, and negative body image are significant barriers to PA participation. Adolescents and university students who lack confidence in their physical abilities may be reluctant to engage in physical activities, especially if they have had negative experiences in the past (Ha et al., 2024). For example, a student who struggled with sports in childhood may perceive PA as stressful, rather than enjoyable, leading to avoidance behaviours. Additionally, **fear of failure**, whether in the form of poor performance in sports or concerns about being judged by peers, often prevents individuals from trying or continuing physical activities (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2024).

Motivational barriers also play a critical role in limiting PA participation. **Extrinsic motivations**, such as academic pressure or a lack of perceived personal benefit, can overshadow intrinsic motivations like enjoyment or health. In university settings, where academic demands are high, physical activity may be viewed as secondary to academic success, leading to reduced participation (Peng et al., 2023).

Sociocultural Barriers

Sociocultural factors, particularly **gender norms** and **body image perceptions**, significantly influence physical activity engagement. Gender disparities in PA are well-documented, with women often facing greater barriers than men. These barriers include societal expectations around femininity, which may discourage women from engaging in certain types of physical activities, such as weightlifting or competitive sports (Limani et al., 2022a; Limani et al., 2022b; Wicker et al., 2024). Additionally, women may feel self-conscious about their body image, particularly in settings that emphasize performance and

physical appearance. This is often compounded by the **sexualization** of female athletes in media and society which may discourage participation (Kozleva, Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2021a).

Cultural perceptions of physical activity also contribute to low engagement in the latter. In some cultural contexts, academic success is prioritized over physical health, particularly in low income or highly competitive environments, and that can hinder adolescents from engaging in extracurricular physical activities (Kozleva, Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2021b).

Environmental Barriers

The environment plays a significant role in shaping physical activity behaviors. **Access to safe, affordable, and appropriate facilities** is a major environmental barrier (Angelova, Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2023). University students often face challenges in accessing exercise facilities due to either insufficient sports infrastructure on campus or the high costs associated with gym memberships (Alkhalwaldeh et al., 2024). For adolescents, particularly those in low income neighborhoods, environmental barriers are even more pronounced. Limited access to recreational spaces, lack of transportation, and financial constraints can prevent young people from participating in organized sports or physical activities (Ha et al., 2024).

Benefits of physical activity

Despite the barriers, the benefits of physical activity are far-reaching and outweigh the obstacles due to their impact on various aspects of an individual's health and well-being.

Physical Health Benefits

Regular physical activity is essential for maintaining good physical health, reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity (Nansa, Ghafouri, 2019; Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2020). Engaging in PA during adolescence and early adulthood also contributes to the development of muscle strength, bone density, and cardiovascular fitness that are crucial for long-term health (Tiaotrakul, 2024). For university students, PA is linked to improved sleep quality, better energy levels, and overall vitality, all of which can enhance academic performance (Peng et al., 2023).

Mental Health Benefits

The mental health benefits of physical activity are also significant. Regular exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress which are particularly prevalent among university students due to academic pressures (Gilgallon et al., 2024). Additionally, physical activity is associated with improved cognitive function, including enhanced concentration, memory, and problem-solving abilities – key skills for academic success (Ha et al., 2024). In adolescents, PA provides a valuable outlet for stress, promoting emotional regulation and increasing self-esteem (Kozleva, Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2021b).

Social and Academic Benefits

Physical activity also offers important social benefits. Team sports in particular, promote teamwork, communication, and leadership skills that are valuable for students transitioning into university life (Tiaotrakul, 2024). The **social connections** formed through physical activity can foster a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial for students who may be adjusting to a new social environment.

Moreover, physical activity has been shown to enhance academic performance by improving cognitive function and concentration (Ha et al., 2024). For adolescents, engaging in physical activity can improve school attendance, decrease dropout rates and contribute to higher levels of school engagement (Gilgallon et al., 2024).

Strategies for promoting physical activity engagement

Given the barriers to physical activity, various strategies can be implemented at both the individual and institutional levels to enhance engagement.

Individual-Level Interventions

At the individual level, **intrinsic motivation** plays a crucial role in fostering long-term engagement in PA. Interventions aimed at building self-efficacy through skill building activities, goal setting, and positive reinforcement can help students feel more confident in their ability to participate in physical activities (Astuti et al., 2024). Moreover, **gender-sensitive interventions** are needed to address the

unique challenges faced by women and promote equal opportunities for all genders in physical activity (Orhan et al., 2024).

Institutional-Level Interventions

At the institutional level, universities and schools should prioritize the creation of **inclusive, accessible physical activity programs**. This includes improving the availability of exercise facilities, offering flexible schedules, and providing low cost or free PA opportunities (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2024). Moreover, policies that integrate physical activity into the academic curriculum and emphasize a holistic approach to student well-being are essential for fostering long term PA engagement (Hautbois, Desbordes, 2023).

Community-Based Interventions

For adolescents in underserved areas, community-based programs can help mitigate environmental barriers to PA. Local governments and organizations should collaborate to develop programs that provide safe, accessible, and affordable PA opportunities in low-income neighborhoods (Marcos-Rivero et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the barriers to physical activity participation among university students and adolescents are complex and multifaceted, encompassing psychological, sociocultural, and environmental factors. However, the benefits of regular physical activity ranging from improved physical and mental health to enhanced academic performance and social well-being underscore the importance of fostering greater engagement in PA among young individuals. Tailored interventions that address both individual and systemic barriers are crucial for promoting physical activity participation. By creating a supportive environment that offers enjoyable and accessible opportunities for physical activity, educational institutions and policymakers can help improve the overall well-being and success of students.

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