



The Role of Sports in Shaping Social Capital and Mobility in Urban Pakistan

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Abstract

Background and Study Aim

In urban Pakistan, sport and fitness have emerged as significant social signifiers that determine class formation and lifestyle posture. However, there has been little empirical work on how participation in these activities affects social mobility. This article explores the links between sports/fitness participation, social capital and perceived upward mobility in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad with reference to Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital.

Material and Methods

Cross-sectional study design was used. The sample, recruited from the

universities, gyms and recreational clubs through stratified sampling by lots targeted individuals between 18 -40 years of age were invited to participate. All were eligible because they had participated in sports or fitness activities three times a week. Online and paper questionnaires were collected from March to July 2025. Standardised measures included the International Physical Activity Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, WHO-5 Well-being Index and modified scales of mobility aspirations. Descriptive statistics of samples and chi-square, ANOVA and multivariate regression were utilized to compare data.

Results

Findings revealed significant associations between education, income, and fitness participation. The education level ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), gym membership ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), and frequency of participation ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$) were strong explanatory variables for self-reported upward mobility in the regression models. Participation in organized exercise predicted higher levels of self-esteem, community integration, and social cohesion. But it was only accessible to the poor through iron gates of affordability and gender norms.

Conclusion

Sports and physical exercise in Urban Pakistan beyond health acts as mechanisms of negotiation of class boundaries, boosting the social capital. Education, attendance to the gym and frequency of activity greatly influence perceived mobility. In the policy framework, goal-oriented infrastructure and equal opportunity is crucial so that fitness culture can be a part of wide-alternating social equity.

Keywords: Sports, Fitness, Social Mobility, Cultural Capital, Urban Pakistan

Introduction and Literature Review

Social and cultural life in urban Pakistan has changed dramatically over the past two decades as a result of globalization, urbanization and digital media. Sports and wellness have progressively emerged as a source of class identity, lifestyle aspiration and social position (Ahmed et al., 2021). Academics have posited that fitness culture in South Asia not only shapes 'the body' but also becomes a terrain of symbolic capital through which status and belonging are contested (Qureshi & Khan, 2022). The proliferation of fitness clubs, gyms and city sports facilities is a clear manifestation of the commodification of physical culture as well as implications for both gender and class relationship (see Hussain, 2023). Recent research highlights the fact that sport and fitness are not only for amusement purpose, instead these activities are imbedded in societal structures which shape education mobility, employability opportunities and cultural prestige (Shah & Fatima, 2021). For instance, cricket academies and gymnasium memberships become more interconnected today with the upwardly mobile urban youth. whose networks and cultural competency are coveted

within elite circles (Khalid 2022). In spite of these changes, the empirical documentation on how urban Pakistanis negotiate fitness and sports within social mobility to date remains relatively scarce. This gap is addressed by this study, which evaluates the relationship between exercise routine and economic ambitions drawing on 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986/2020) and social mobility models (Naseer & Rahman, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital: cultural, social, and symbolic capital, and how these forms intersect within the sports and fitness domain. Fitness practices are treated as embodied cultural capital, which provide symbolic distinction in urban contexts. Sports participation is assumed to increase social networks and community integration, as well as perceived self-esteem, leading to vertical and horizontal mobility. The study is also theoretically inspired by theories of social mobility and stratification (Hussain & Malik, 2021), which connect physical culture to wider social systems.

Methodology

Study Design

Cross-sectional survey design was used to explore links between sports/fitness participation and social mobility indicators. This is a design for investigating associations and social processes but it doesn't make causal inferences.

Population and Setting

The target population included university students, gym-goers, and recreational athletes in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. Inclusion criteria were: (a) aged 18–40, (b) active participation in sports/fitness at least three times per week, and (c) residency in urban Pakistan. Exclusion criteria included professional athletes and individuals with diagnosed medical restrictions for physical activity.

Sampling Strategy

We used a stratified random sample, which was balanced with regard to gender and to socioeconomic status. The sample size was estimated at $n = 384$ ($\alpha = 0.05$; $\beta = 0.80$).— to which another ten per cent were added to account for possible dropouts with the end result being a total of $N = 450$ participants. Nonresponse bias was minimal among low-income respondents, and the overall response rate was 88%.

Instrumentation

The survey included validated scales such as the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and the WHO-5 Wellbeing Index. Items on social mobility aspirations were adapted from Shah and Fatima (2021) and underwent translation/back-translation in Urdu. Pilot testing with 50 participants yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.80, confirming internal consistency.

Variables and Measures

Dependent variables were gender, social class, education and participation in a team. Dependent variables included physical activity participation, motivation, and social cohesion. Age, health status and income were statistically adjusted for confounders. Physical activity involvement and social cohesion were obtained from IPAQ scores and Likert scale questions, respectively.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered from March to July 2025 using a web-based survey and paper questionnaires distributed to gym centers and universities. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained and the data stored in encrypted servers. Interviewers well trained in both the instruments completed it in a face-to-face manner after accessing to it was made available at common venues.

Ethical Considerations

The protocol of the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Department of Sports Science and Physical Education, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Consent Written or electronic consent was obtained from subjects prior to participation. Data was de-identified and any identifiers deleted to preserve confidentiality.

Data Analysis Plan

Data were processed by SPSS 28. Demographic and participation variables were summarized with descriptive statistics. Inferential tests included chi-square, ANOVA, and multivariate regression to assess predictors of social mobility outcomes. Effect sizes and confidence intervals were reported alongside p-values. Thematic analysis was applied to open-ended responses using NVivo 14.

Validity and Reliability

Construct validity was established through factor analysis. Internal consistency reliability was measured via Cronbach's alpha (>0.80). To minimize bias, standardized survey protocols and double data entry were employed. Potential limitations such as recall bias and social desirability bias were acknowledged.

Results

In Table 1 Respondents' demographic features are displayed . Findings show that participation in sports and fitness was significantly related to perceived upward mobility and social cohesion. Higher education, gym membership and participation level were powerful predictors of self-reported social mobility from regression analysis.

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	260	57.8
Gender	Female	190	42.2
Education	Undergraduate	210	46.7
Education	Postgraduate	240	53.3
Income Level	Low	120	26.7

Income Level	Middle	220	48.9
Income Level	High	110	24.4

Table 2 shows regression results highlighting predictors of social mobility.

Predictor	Beta	t	p
Education Level	0.34	5.42	<0.001
Gym Membership	0.28	4.11	<0.01
Participation Frequency	0.22	3.87	<0.01
Income Level	0.19	2.95	<0.05

Discussion

This article shows that participation in sports and fitness activities in urban Pakistan is a private concern not only for personal health but also intimately linked with the procedures of social mobility. Echoing previous studies (Qureshi & Khan, 2022; Hussain, 2023), the results indicate that fitness culture affords symbolic resources for construction of class identities. The positive relationship that education, gym membership and self-reported upward mobility have with one another can be seen as an echo of the space designed by Bourdieu in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986/2020). Second, participation in sporting activities seems to promote social solidarity and self-worth, echoing claims from South Asia (Shah & Fatima, 2021). However, inequities persist even among low income groups due to structural barriers (affordability and accessibility) and gender constraints. These results emphasise the importance of universal sports facilities and policy solutions which bring down socioeconomic barriers. The implications extend to precision sports nutrition and athlete development, suggesting that fostering equitable access to fitness culture may enhance not only health but also social equity.

Conclusion

Methodologically, the research both validates and extends on sports sociology literature by providing empirical evidence of how fitness and sport participation influence social mobility paths in urban Pakistan. Education, gym membership, and number of times participants use the stairs significantly predict upward mobility perceptions. Policy Coordination mechanisms need to promote sport and fitness places besides their inclusion in the urban-planning, and social development policies.

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