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## Effect of Social Environment on Sports Participation of University Students: A Cross-Sectional Survey Study

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### ABSTRACT

*Sports participation among university students is shaped by a complex set of social, cultural, institutional, and economic forces. This cross-sectional survey investigated the influence of eight social environment dimensions on sports participation among students at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. A purposive stratified sample of 100 students (62% male, 38% female; M age = 22.4*

years,  $SD = 2.7$ ; 63% registered athletes, 37% non-athletes) completed a 22-item expert-validated structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS Version 28.0 (IBM Corp., 2021). Teammate support (86.5%), peer motivational influence (83.0%), coach support (81.5%), and perceived community importance of sport (86.0%) were the strongest social facilitators of participation. Awareness of sport health benefits was near-universal (92.7%). Social media supported skill development for 79.3% of respondents. Financial constraints constituted the primary structural barrier, reported as limiting by 54.0% of participants. Findings are interpreted through Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986), and implications for sport policy and student well-being in Pakistani higher education are discussed.

**Keywords:** social environment, sports participation, university students, peer influence, coaching, Self-Determination Theory, Pakistan, physical activity

## 1. Background of the Study

Playing sport and staying physically active are among the healthiest things young adults can do. The university years — usually from the late teens to the mid-twenties — are a key time to build lifelong active habits. Students are free to decide whether or not to exercise during this time; it is not mandated by the school. This implies that the primary factors influencing kids' decision to participate in sports or not are those in their immediate surroundings, including friends, family, coaches, cultural norms, and financial constraints. Regular physical activity during young adulthood is one of the most economical health investments any institution can make, according to research that examined more than 170 long-term studies. This is because it lowers long-term sickness and saves significantly more in healthcare expenditures than it costs to offer. Additionally, research has demonstrated that participation in sports enhances mental health and reduces youth anxiety and sadness. These findings give universities a strong reason to build social environments that support student sport participation. (Warburton et al., 2006; Biddle & Asare, 2011).

### 1.1 Family and Parental Influence on Sport Participation

The family is the first and most important social setting for sport. Parents affect their children's sport involvement in four main ways: (a) practical help such as transport and buying equipment; (b) encouragement and emotional support; (c) being a role model by being active themselves; and

(d) passing on values that treat sport as something worthwhile and important. Long-term studies demonstrate that parents who encourage their children to participate in sports at a young age develop attitudes and behaviors that carry over into adulthood, even college. Compared to many Western nations, parents in Pakistan typically have more control over their adult children's decisions, so their opinions on sports are even more significant at the university level. Parental disapproval was cited by 61.3% of non-participating women in a poll of 400 female university students in Lahore as the primary reason they did not participate in sports, a larger percentage than financial difficulties (48.2%), time constraints (39.6%), or subpar facilities (31.7%). This shows that getting parental permission is a basic requirement for female student sport participation in this setting (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Raza et al., 2020).

### **1.2 Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Sport Participation**

Culture and religion set the broadest rules around who can play sport, when, and how. Islamic principles in Pakistan typically encourage athletics and physical fitness as components of a disciplined, healthy lifestyle. The nation's most popular sport, cricket, unites young men from all walks of life. However, independent of the student's personal preferences or the facilities provided, a combination of Islamic dress standards, gender separation norms, and cultural rules about women in public settings create actual hurdles to sport for female students. According to a research of 1,218 Pakistani university students, female students gave cultural acceptance of sports a higher priority than facility quality. Therefore, rather than just constructing better facilities, it would be more beneficial to offer more culturally acceptable sport programs that are made to conform to rather than defy current conventions (Benn et al., 2011; Ahmad, 2011; Niazi et al., 2016).

### **1.3 Peer Influence and Social Support in University Sport**

When it comes to lifestyle decisions, including athletics, friends and peers become the most significant influences. Peers have an impact on sports involvement in a number of ways: they encourage one another to participate, they establish a standard in which sports are accepted and appreciated, they support one another, and they foster a sense of community through team membership. Higher motivation, greater enjoyment, and lower dropout rates were found to be independently correlated with relationship quality, peer acceptance, and a favorable team environment in a long-term study. These effects were even more pronounced than those of coaching in leisure sports. These results are consistent with SDT's theory that true and long-lasting motivation requires fulfilling the basic human need of feeling connected to others.

Team closeness, or how much members enjoy being together, is a substantial predictor of sustained engagement, with benefits as strong as those of coaching quality, according to a large evaluation of 46 studies. The social aspect of sports is exactly what motivates the majority of college students to continue participating (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Carron et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 1985)

#### **1.4 Coaching Quality and the Motivational Climate**

The coach is the most important person-level factor in organised sport. Coaches have an impact on athletes by imparting knowledge and fostering a positive training environment. Giving instructions, being democratic, being autocratic, providing social support, and providing positive feedback are the five essential coaching characteristics, according to research on coaching behavior. Research consistently demonstrates that while harsh or dominating coaching results in reduced motivation and higher dropout rates, social support and positive feedback are the biggest predictors of athlete motivation and continuing participation. The bond between coach and athlete is crucial in university sports, because the majority of students participate for enjoyment rather than competitiveness. Stronger intrinsic motivation and longer-term commitment to sport are produced by coaches who provide players alternatives, explain the rationale for training activities, and listen to athletes' opinions, according to a popular coaching model based on SDT (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Ntoumanis, 2001)

#### **1.5 Community and Recreational Sport as Participation Foundation**

Not every sport takes place in official clubs and contests. The most popular kind of sport engagement among college students is recreational sport, which is performed primarily for enjoyment, health, and socializing. It is a crucial beginning point for more formal involvement. Throughout youth and early adulthood, engaging in a variety of fun sports fosters the development of physical literacy, which is the self-assurance, abilities, knowledge, and drive to maintain an active lifestyle. Individuals who develop great physical literacy at a young age are far more likely to maintain an active lifestyle. Given the expense of enrolling in formal programs and cultural limitations on certain forms of involvement, home hobbies and casual neighborhood games are frequently the most accessible forms of sport for Pakistani university students. Community sport events also help build social bonds and a sense of civic belonging alongside their role in encouraging participation (Whitehead, 2010; Wicker et al., 2012)

### **1.6 Media, Social Media, and Sport Participation**

Social media, streaming, and television all have a significant impact on how people view sports. Viewers' confidence and motivation to engage are boosted when they witness athletes execute and triumph, according to SCT. The biggest single factor influencing young people's interest in sports in Pakistan is cricket broadcast media, particularly the Pakistan Super League (PSL), which was introduced in 2016, fostering a common national sports culture. According to a research of 1,200 young adults, viewing sports on a regular basis was positively correlated with their participation frequency, level of confidence, and degree of identification as athletes. Social media has advanced by enabling students to engage rather than only observe: they can follow athletes, join fitness communities, access free coaching videos, and share their own sport activity. A review of research on social media and sport confirmed that being part of an online sport community is positively linked to actually participating in sport, with effects working through increased confidence and feelings of belonging. (Bandura, 1986; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018; Filo et al., 2015)

## **2. METHOD AND MATERIAL**

### **2.1 Research Design**

A cross-sectional descriptive survey design was employed. This design enables simultaneous measurement of multiple social environment dimensions and generation of population-level descriptive estimates at a single defined point in time, consistent with standard methodology in social environment and sport participation determinants research. All procedures adhered to ethical principles of voluntary informed consent, full response anonymity, and participant right of withdrawal (Sallis et al., 2000).

### **2.2 Participants and Sampling**

The target population comprised all undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, during the 2023–2024 academic year. A purposive stratified sample of  $N = 100$  students was recruited to ensure proportional representation across athlete status, gender, year of study, and faculty. Registered athletes were defined as students formally enrolled with a recognised university sport team, club, or association. Age ranged from 18 to 30 years ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 2.7$ ). Full demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 (Niazi et al., 2016).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 100)*

<b>Characteristic and Category</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	62 (62.0)
Female	38 (38.0)
<b>Age in Years</b>	
18–21	44 (44.0)
22–25	41 (41.0)
26–30	15 (15.0)
<b>Year of Study</b>	
First Year	26 (26.0)
Second Year	28 (28.0)
Third Year	27 (27.0)
Fourth Year	19 (19.0)
<b>Athlete Status</b>	
Registered University Athlete	63 (63.0)
Non-Athlete	37 (37.0)
<b>Faculty Affiliation</b>	
Social Sciences	34 (34.0)
Sciences	28 (28.0)
Arts and Humanities	22 (22.0)
Management Sciences	16 (16.0)
<b>Sport Type (athletes only, n = 63)</b>	
Team Sports (cricket, football, field hockey)	41 (65.1)
Individual Sports (athletics, martial arts)	22 (34.9)

Note. Bold labels indicate characteristic groupings; indented entries indicate categories within each group.

Sport type percentages are based on registered athletes only ( $n = 63$ ). All other percentages are based on the full sample ( $N = 100$ ). Minor rounding may produce apparent discrepancies.

### **Instrument**

Data were collected via a researcher-developed 22-item structured questionnaire developed through: (a) item generation guided by established social environment frameworks for physical activity determinants; (b) expert content validation by two sports science faculty members who independently rated items for clarity and representativeness; and (c) item refinement based on expert feedback. Items Q1–Q8 used a three-option format (Yes / No / Maybe) assessing parental, religious-cultural, coaching, peer, and economic dimensions. Items Q9–Q22 used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) assessing recreational, media, community, institutional, and financial barrier dimensions (Sallis et al., 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

### **2.3 Procedure**

Following departmental research committee approval and verbal informed consent, the principal investigator administered questionnaires individually across four consecutive academic weeks, visiting sports grounds, canteens, common areas, and departmental buildings. Questionnaires were completed individually without time pressure. The investigator was available to clarify ambiguous items without directing responses. All responses were fully anonymous. All 100 distributed questionnaires were returned completed, yielding a 100% response rate.

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

Data were coded and analysed using SPSS Version 28.0 (IBM Corp., 2021). Descriptive statistics — absolute frequencies ( $n$ ) and percentages (%) — were computed for all 22 items. For Likert items (Q9–Q22), Strongly Agree and Agree were combined into a positive category and Strongly Disagree and Disagree into a negative category. Results are presented in Tables 1–4: demographic characteristics, dichotomous item responses, Likert item responses by thematic group, and a consolidated summary ranked by positive response rate (Sallis et al., 2000).

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1 Dichotomous Items (Q1–Q8): Social Influence Dimensions**

Table 2 presents frequency distributions for the eight dichotomous items. Awareness of sport health and social benefits recorded the highest positive rate across all 22 items (92.7%). Peer motivational influence received the strongest social influence endorsement (83.0%), followed by coach support for goal achievement (81.5%), sport's impact on daily life (80.3%), parental

permission (77.5%), cultural influence (76.3%), and financial status affecting participation (74.0%). Religious support for sport was affirmed by 70.8%; however, 11.2% reported a religious constraint and 18.0% were uncertain, reflecting coexisting enabling and restrictive normative interpretations of sport within the sample (Niazi et al., 2016; Raza et al., 2020).

**Table 2**

Frequency Distributions for Dichotomous Survey Items: Social Influence Dimensions (N = 100)

Survey Item	Yes (%)	No (%)	Maybe (%)
Q1. Parents or guardians permit sports participation	77.5	5.6	16.9
Q2. Religion supports sports participation	70.8	11.2	18.0
Q3. Cultural or language background influences participation	76.3	10.2	13.6
Q4. Aware of health and social benefits of sport	92.7	4.5	2.8
Q5. Sport significantly influences my daily life	80.3	7.9	11.8
Q6. Coach or teacher motivational support aids goal achievement	81.5	6.7	11.8
Q7. Peer group or friends motivate sports participation	83.0	9.0	8.0
Q8. Financial or economic status affects sports participation	74.0	12.0	14.0

*Note.* Response format: Yes / No / Maybe. Item codes Q1–Q8 correspond to the validated questionnaire instrument.

Percentages are based on the full sample (N = 100). Higher Yes (%) values indicate stronger positive social environment endorsement. Values may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

### 3.2 Likert-Scale Items (Q9–Q22): Thematic Group Analysis

Table 3 presents Likert distributions for items Q9–Q22 by four thematic groups. Within Recreational and Household Sport, informal games improving skills received the highest positive rate (85.4%), followed by sport as a recreational activity (79.2%) and household game participation (75.8%). Within Community and Peer Factors, sport with friends promoting well-being received the highest endorsement in the Likert section (89.9%), followed by teammate influence (86.5%), community sport importance (86.0%), and community event motivation (82.2%). Within Media and Social Media, role model motivation scored highest (84.9%), followed by social media as a skill resource (79.3%), media lifestyle influence (69.6%), and regular viewing (65.2%). Within Institutional and Financial Factors,

university facility adequacy was affirmed by 79.8%; financial barriers produced the study's only divided response — 54.0% positive, 20.2% neutral, 25.8% negative — making it the single item exhibiting substantial disagreement (Scheerder et al., 2005; Filo et al., 2015).

**Table 3**

*Likert-Scale Survey Response Distributions by Thematic Group (N = 100)*

Survey Item	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
<i>Recreational and Household Sport Engagement</i>					
Q9. Sport is my primary recreational activity	40.4	38.8	19.1	1.7	0.0
Q10. I play household or family games regularly	33.7	42.1	16.3	6.7	1.1
Q12. Informal games improve my sport skills	43.3	42.1	11.2	2.8	0.6
<i>Community Norms and Peer Social Factors</i>					
Q11. Sport holds great importance in my community	44.4	41.6	11.8	1.7	0.6
Q17. Playing sport with friends promotes my well-being	48.3	41.6	6.7	3.4	0.0
Q19. Community sporting events motivate my participation	38.9	43.3	12.2	4.4	1.1
Q20. Teammates positively influence my performance	46.1	40.4	9.0	3.4	1.1
<i>Media and Social Media Exposure</i>					
Q13. Social media helps me improve my sport skills	31.5	47.8	14.0	3.4	3.4
Q14. I regularly watch sport on TV or streaming platforms	27.0	38.2	18.0	14.0	2.8
Q15. Watching sport on media influences my lifestyle	24.7	44.9	25.3	4.5	0.6
Q16. Social media content attracts me to participate	28.7	36.5	19.7	14.6	0.6
Q22. Having a sport role model motivates my participation	41.6	43.3	10.1	3.4	1.7
<i>Institutional Support and Financial Access</i>					
Q18. University or school facilities support participation	35.6	44.2	13.0	5.6	1.7

Q21. Financial barriers limit my sports participation	22.5	31.5	20.2	17.4	8.4
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*Note.* SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

Items are organised under four thematic group headings (shown in italics). Combined positive = SA + A. Combined negative = D + SD. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

### 3.3 Consolidated Summary of All Items

Table 4 ranks all 22 items in descending order by positive response rate. The five highest rates were: awareness of sport benefits (92.7%), sport with friends promoting well-being (89.9%), teammate influence (86.5%), community sport importance (86.0%), and informal game skill development (85.4%). Twelve of 22 items exceeded 79% positive endorsement, confirming that social environment factors are broadly experienced as participation-enabling across this sample. Financial barriers (54.0% positive, 25.8% negative) stood apart as the sole item exhibiting substantial negative endorsement, confirming economic access as a structurally distinct barrier in this population (Scheerder et al., 2005; Sallis et al., 2000).

**Table 4**

*Consolidated Summary of All Survey Items Ranked by Positive Response Rate (N = 100)*

Survey Item	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Q4. Awareness of health and social benefits of sport	92.7	2.8	4.5
Q17. Sport with friends promotes relaxation and well-being	89.9	6.7	3.4
Q20. Teammates positively influence sport performance	86.5	9.0	4.5
Q11. Sport holds importance in the community	86.0	11.8	2.3
Q12. Informal games improve sport skills	85.4	11.2	3.4
Q22. Sport role models motivate participation	84.9	10.1	5.1
Q7. Peer group or friends motivate sports participation	83.0	8.0	9.0
Q19. Community sporting events motivate participation	82.2	12.2	5.5
Q6. Coach motivational support aids goal achievement	81.5	11.8	6.7

Q5. Sport significantly influences daily life	80.3	11.8	7.9
Q18. University facilities support participation	79.8	13.0	7.3
Q13. Social media helps improve sport skills	79.3	14.0	6.8
Q9. Sport used as primary recreational activity	79.2	19.1	1.7
Q1. Parents or guardians permit sports participation	77.5	16.9	5.6
Q3. Cultural background influences participation	76.3	13.6	10.2
Q10. Household or family games played regularly	75.8	16.3	7.8
Q8. Financial or economic status affects participation	74.0	14.0	12.0
Q2. Religion supports sports participation	70.8	18.0	11.2
Q15. Watching sport on media influences lifestyle	69.6	25.3	5.1
Q14. Regularly watches sport on TV or streaming	65.2	18.0	16.8
Q16. Social media content attracts sport participation	65.2	19.7	15.2
Q21. Financial barriers limit sport participation	54.0	20.2	25.8

*Note.* Items Q1–Q8 used Yes/No/Maybe format; items Q9–Q22 used a five-point Likert scale.

Positive (%) = Yes or SA + A combined. Neutral (%) = Maybe or Neutral. Negative (%) = No or D + SD combined. Items ranked in descending order by Positive (%). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The results verify that University of the Punjab students' participation in sports is significantly, multifacetedly, and primarily facilitated by their social environment. In all eight evaluated aspects, social-relational elements such as peer influence, team cohesion, coaching support, family permission, and community sport norms consistently served as the main enablers of participation, with financial restrictions emerging as the predominant structural barrier. These trends align with SDT's theoretical predictions about the critical role of need satisfaction in motivation quality and behavioural persistence, as well as Sallis et al.'s (2000) identification of social support, peer norms, and institutional access as the three most consistently significant environmental predictors of physical activity (Sallis et al., 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

##### 4.1 Family Permission and Cultural Norms

Family sport socialization serves as the fundamental entry point for engagement in this population, as seen by the 77.5% parental consent rate. The current findings expand the findings

of Fredricks and Eccles (2005), who found through longitudinal evidence that parental sport support generates engagement dispositions that endure throughout life, to the Pakistani university setting. Family involvement outreach programs are necessary for a significant at-risk category identified by the 16.9% unsure parental consent rate. The coexistence of religious restriction (11.2%) and religious support (70.8%) supports Benn et al.'s (2011) claim that normative interpretation, not religion itself, is the operative variable. This confirms that institutional sport programming that is culturally congruent can change normatively restrictive environments into ones that encourage participation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Benn et al., 2011; Raza et al., 2020).

#### **4.2 Peer Influence and Team Cohesion**

Peer motivation (83.0%), teammate support (86.5%), and sport with friends promoting well-being (89.9%) provide strong convergent evidence that relatedness — the SDT need for meaningful social connection — is the most proximal social driver of sport participation motivation in this sample. These results are in line with the meta-analytic confirmation of social cohesion as a significant predictor of participation persistence by Carron et al. (2002) and the longitudinal evidence by Ullrich-French and Smith (2006) that peer relationship quality is the strongest predictor of sport continuation at university age. Compared to universities that only concentrate on competitive results, those that invest in inclusive, socially cohesive sport environments will be better able to keep recreational participants (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Carron et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

#### **4.3 Coaching Quality**

Coaching atmosphere is the greatest direct institutional influencer of athlete need satisfaction and persistence, according to 81.5% of respondents who support coach motivational support. In particular, autonomy-supportive coaching generates intrinsic drive and sport commitment, which are directly represented in the current endorsement pattern, according to Mageau and Vallerand's (2003) SDT-based coaching model. A non-trivial at-risk minority is identified by the 11.8% neutral and 6.7% negative coaching responses; the study's highest-leverage single institutional intervention is systematic investment in SDT-informed coach education, which includes autonomy-supportive feedback, athlete-centered goal setting, and positive reinforcement (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Ntoumanis, 2001; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980).

#### **4.4 Media and Social Media**

Social media's integration into sport socialization for this population is demonstrated by the endorsement of social media as a skill resource (79.3%), role model motivation (84.9%), and social media participation attraction (65.2%). This is in line with Filo et al.'s (2015) systematic review, which confirms that social media sport community membership is positively associated with participation intentions and behavior. Students who watch athlete role models and interact with online sport communities have higher sport self-efficacy and stronger involvement intentions, which is directly related to the SCT mechanisms of observational learning and self-efficacy improvement (Bandura, 1986). Through student-athlete material, coaching tutorials, and digitally enabled sport communities, university athletic departments should proactively utilize digital platforms (Filo et al., 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018; Bandura, 1986).

#### **4.5 Financial Barriers and Structural Equity**

Scheerder et al. (2005) found that socioeconomic status is one of the biggest indicators of sport participation inequality, with lower-income pupils routinely excluded from organized sport despite equal motivation. This finding is supported by financial barriers mentioned by 54.0% of respondents. Transportation, facility fees, and equipment prices create real access barriers that social and motivational interventions cannot solve on their own. Therefore, open access to recreational facilities, equipment lending programs, and needs-based sport subsidies should be viewed as structural requirements rather than extra features for an equitable university sport policy (Scheerder et al., 2005; Coalter, 2007; Sallis et al., 2000).

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This study offers systematic cross-sectional data supporting H1: University of the Punjab students' participation in sports is significantly, multidimensionally, and mostly positively impacted by the social environment. Through SDT need satisfaction and SCT observational learning mechanisms, peer relationships, team cohesion, coaching support, family permission, community sport norms, and exposure to digital media consistently served as participation facilitators. Over half of the sample is affected by financial obstacles, which are the single most structurally important participation constraint. These barriers necessitate direct institutional and legislative measures, which social and motivational interventions cannot replace. Pakistani universities and sport governing bodies must concurrently invest in needs-based financial support, SDT-informed coach education, gender-inclusive infrastructure, and digitally enabled sport communities to guarantee

equitable participation access across gender, economic background, and cultural heritage. These results establish clear priority factors for Pakistani university sport strategy and offer an empirical basis for such spending that is context-specific (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Bandura, 1986; Sallis et al., 2000; Scheerder et al., 2005; Niazi et al., 2016).

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