

Motivational Factors Influencing Participation in Recreational Sports Among University Students

1. **D. Rohit Chauhan**, Associate Professor, Department of Physical Education, IIMT University, Meerut
2. **Dr. Shubham Kumar**, Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education, IIMT University, Meerut

ABSTRACT

University students participate in recreational sports for a wide range of psychological, social, physical, and lifestyle-related reasons. Recreational sports provide students with opportunities to improve fitness, reduce stress, build friendships, maintain health, and experience enjoyment outside the formal academic environment. Unlike varsity or elite athletic participation, recreational sports are usually flexible, inclusive, and non-professional in nature. Because of this, students' motivations for participating are often different from those of competitive athletes. Understanding these motivations is important for universities seeking to design programs that attract, retain, and support a broad student population.

This descriptive study examined the motivational factors influencing participation in recreational sports among university students. The study focused on six major motivational factors: enjoyment, physical fitness, health maintenance, stress relief, social interaction, and competition. A descriptive survey design was used to collect data from 150 university students between the ages of 18 and 26. Participants were selected from five academic faculties: science, humanities, engineering, business, and arts. All respondents reported participating in recreational sports at least once per week during the previous semester. Recreational activities included intramural games, gym sessions, yoga, jogging groups, fitness classes, hiking clubs, and informal pick-up games.

A structured questionnaire was used to measure the importance of each motivational factor. Respondents rated each factor using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning "Not important at all," to 5, meaning "Very important." Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for each motivational category. The findings showed that enjoyment was the strongest motivational factor, with a mean score of 4.6. Physical fitness followed closely with a mean score of 4.5, while health maintenance received a mean score of 4.4. Stress relief was also highly rated at 4.3. Social interaction received a moderate rating of 4.0, while competition was the lowest-rated factor at 3.2.

The results indicate that university students are primarily motivated by intrinsic enjoyment and personal well-being rather than competitive achievement. Students appear to value recreational sports as a way to have fun, stay healthy, manage stress, and maintain an active lifestyle. Competition was less important, suggesting that campus recreation programs should emphasize inclusion, flexibility, enjoyment, and wellness rather than performance-based ranking or rivalry. These findings provide practical guidance for campus recreation departments, student wellness offices, and university administrators who aim to improve student engagement, promote mental health, and create supportive recreational environments.

KEYWORDS: Motivation, recreational sports, university students, intrinsic motivation, physical activity, campus wellness, stress relief, enjoyment, health maintenance, social interaction, competition, self-determination theory, student engagement, exercise participation

INTRODUCTION

Recreational sports play an important role in supporting the overall well-being of university students. University life can be demanding, as students are often required to balance academic work, social relationships, part-time employment, financial pressures, and personal responsibilities. These demands may contribute to stress, physical inactivity, poor sleep

habits, and reduced mental well-being. Recreational sports offer students a healthy outlet that can improve physical fitness, reduce stress, encourage social connection, and provide a sense of enjoyment and balance.

Unlike competitive athletics, recreational sports are generally informal, voluntary, and flexible. Students may participate in activities such as intramural games, gym workouts, swimming, yoga, jogging, dance fitness, cycling, hiking, or casual team sports. These activities do not usually require the same level of commitment, selection, training intensity, or performance pressure as varsity athletics. As a result, recreational sports can appeal to a wider range of students, including those who may not consider themselves highly skilled athletes.

Understanding why students participate in recreational sports is essential for increasing engagement and improving campus wellness programs. Universities invest significant resources in sports facilities, fitness centers, intramural leagues, and wellness initiatives. However, these programs are most effective when they reflect the actual needs and interests of students. If institutions understand students' motivations, they can design programs that are more inclusive, accessible, and attractive.

Motivation is one of the most important psychological factors influencing sport and exercise behavior. According to Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan, individuals are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity because it is enjoyable, satisfying, or personally meaningful. Extrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity because of external outcomes, such as rewards, recognition, social approval, or competition. In recreational sports, intrinsic motivation may be especially important because students usually participate voluntarily and are not required to meet competitive performance standards.

For many university students, enjoyment may be a primary reason for participating in recreational sports. When students find an activity fun, they are more likely to continue participating over time. Enjoyment can also help students form positive attitudes toward physical activity, making it more likely that they will maintain active lifestyles beyond university. Physical fitness is another common motivation, as students may participate in recreational sports to improve strength, endurance, flexibility, body composition, or overall physical capability.

Health maintenance is also an important factor. Students may recognize that regular physical activity can help prevent illness, improve cardiovascular health, support weight management, and promote long-term wellness. In addition, recreational sports may help students cope with academic stress. Physical activity has been associated with improved mood, reduced anxiety, and better stress management. For students facing exams, deadlines, and social pressures, recreational sports may provide an effective way to relax and reset mentally.

Social interaction is another possible motivation. Recreational sports can create opportunities for students to meet peers, form friendships, develop teamwork skills, and feel connected to campus life. This may be especially important for first-year students, international students, or students who feel isolated. However, not all students participate for social reasons. Some may prefer individual activities such as gym workouts, yoga, or running because they value personal time and independence.

Competition may also motivate some students, especially those who enjoy challenges, games, and achievement. However, competition may be less central in recreational settings than in varsity athletics. Some students may avoid highly competitive environments because they associate them with pressure, exclusion, or fear of judgment. Therefore, campus recreation programs must balance opportunities for competition with low-pressure activities that welcome students of different skill levels.

Although many studies have examined motivation among elite athletes, varsity athletes, and organized sport participants, fewer studies have focused specifically on recreational sport participants in university settings. Recreational participants often have more diverse motives because they are not necessarily pursuing championships, scholarships, or athletic careers. Instead, their reasons may be connected to personal enjoyment, lifestyle balance, health, mental well-being, and social belonging.

This study aims to describe the relative importance of six motivational factors influencing university students' participation in recreational sports: enjoyment, physical fitness, health maintenance, stress relief, social interaction, and competition. By identifying which factors students value most, the study can help university administrators and recreation managers develop programs that better match student needs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a descriptive survey design to examine motivational factors influencing participation in recreational sports among university students. A descriptive design was appropriate because the study aimed to summarize and compare students' motivational ratings rather than test a causal relationship. The goal was to identify which motivational factors were rated as most and least important by students who regularly participate in recreational sports.

The study was quantitative in nature because it used numerical ratings to measure motivation. The results were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. This approach allowed the researcher to compare the relative importance of each motivational factor in a clear and organized way.

Participants

The study included 150 university students between the ages of 18 and 26. Participants were selected from five academic faculties: science, humanities, engineering, business, and arts. Including students from different faculties helped ensure that the sample reflected a broad range of academic backgrounds and student experiences.

All participants reported that they had participated in recreational sports at least once per week during the previous semester. This criterion was used to ensure that respondents had recent and direct experience with recreational sport participation. Activities reported by participants included intramural sports, gym workouts, yoga, fitness classes, jogging, swimming, hiking, and informal pick-up games.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. They were also assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. No personal identifying information was collected.

Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure six motivational factors related to recreational sport participation. The six factors were selected based on common themes in sport motivation and physical activity research. The factors were:

1. **Enjoyment:** Participation because the activity is fun, satisfying, and personally rewarding.
2. **Physical Fitness:** Participation to improve strength, endurance, flexibility, body composition, or general physical condition.
3. **Health Maintenance:** Participation to maintain good health, prevent illness, support wellness, and improve long-term quality of life.
4. **Stress Relief:** Participation to relax, reduce academic pressure, improve mood, and cope with mental or emotional strain.
5. **Social Interaction:** Participation to meet people, spend time with friends, develop friendships, or feel connected to campus life.
6. **Competition:** Participation to challenge oneself, win games, compare performance, or experience rivalry.

Each motivational factor was rated using a 5-point Likert scale. A rating of 1 represented "Not important at all," while a rating of 5 represented "Very important." Higher scores indicated that the factor was more important in influencing participation.

Data Collection

Surveys were distributed online through university mailing lists, campus wellness groups, student recreation pages, and student organization networks. Online distribution allowed the questionnaire to reach students from different faculties and activity backgrounds. Students completed the survey voluntarily at a time convenient for them.

The approximate response rate was 75%, indicating a strong level of interest among students who received the survey invitation. The questionnaire was designed to be short and easy to complete in order to encourage participation and reduce incomplete responses.

Data Analysis

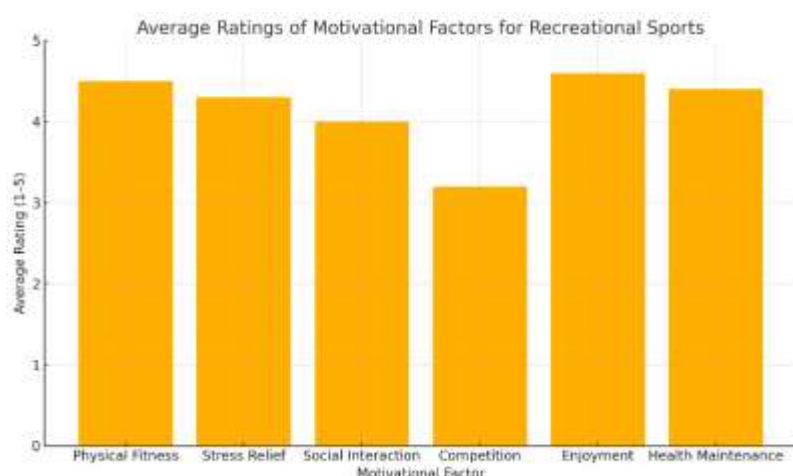
Data were entered into spreadsheet software and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The mean score for each motivational factor was calculated to determine its average importance among respondents. Standard deviations were also calculated to show how much responses varied for each factor.

No inferential statistics were applied because the purpose of the study was descriptive. The focus was on identifying general motivational trends rather than making predictions or testing differences between groups. Results were presented in a table and interpreted according to the relative ranking of each motivational factor.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results showed that university students were most strongly motivated by enjoyment, physical fitness, health maintenance, and stress relief. Social interaction was also rated as important, though slightly lower than the top four factors. Competition received the lowest average rating.

Motivational Factor Average Rating (1–5) Standard Deviation		
Enjoyment	4.6	0.5
Physical Fitness	4.5	0.6
Health Maintenance	4.4	0.6
Stress Relief	4.3	0.7
Social Interaction	4.0	0.8
Competition	3.2	1.0



FINDINGS

Enjoyment emerged as the strongest motivational factor for recreational sport participation, with a mean score of 4.6. This suggests that most students participate because they find recreational sports fun, satisfying, and personally meaningful. Enjoyment is an important factor because students are more likely to continue participating in activities that provide positive emotional experiences. Physical fitness was the second-highest motivational factor, with a mean score

of 4.5. This finding indicates that many students use recreational sports as a way to improve or maintain their physical condition. Students may be motivated by goals such as increasing endurance, improving strength, managing weight, or feeling more energetic.

Health maintenance received a mean score of 4.4, making it the third-highest factor. This suggests that students recognize the importance of recreational sports for long-term health and wellness. Participation may be viewed as a way to prevent illness, improve physical functioning, and support a healthier lifestyle.

Stress relief was also highly rated, with a mean score of 4.3. University students often experience academic stress related to exams, assignments, deadlines, and future career concerns. Recreational sports may help students manage this stress by providing a physical and mental break from academic responsibilities.

Social interaction received a mean score of 4.0. This indicates that students value the social benefits of recreational sports, though social interaction was not rated as highly as enjoyment, fitness, health, or stress relief. This may suggest that many students participate for personal reasons, while still appreciating the opportunity to interact with others.

Competition was the lowest-rated motivational factor, with a mean score of 3.2. This finding suggests that most students are not primarily motivated by winning, rankings, or rivalry in recreational sport settings. The higher standard deviation for competition, at 1.0, indicates greater variation in responses. Some students may enjoy competition, while others may prefer non-competitive or low-pressure activities.

Overall, the results suggest that recreational sport participation among university students is mainly driven by intrinsic and wellness-related motives. Students appear to participate because they enjoy the activities, want to stay fit, want to maintain health, and want to reduce stress. Competitive motives appear to be less important for the majority of students in this sample.

These findings highlight the importance of designing recreational sport programs that are enjoyable, flexible, inclusive, and health-oriented. Programs that focus too heavily on competition may fail to attract students who are seeking fun, stress relief, or personal wellness.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide meaningful insight into the motivations that influence university students' participation in recreational sports. The highest-rated factor was enjoyment, followed closely by physical fitness, health maintenance, and stress relief. These results suggest that students are primarily motivated by personal satisfaction and well-being rather than external rewards or competitive success.

The strong role of enjoyment is especially important. Enjoyment is closely linked with continued participation because students are more likely to repeat behaviors that feel rewarding and positive. If recreational sports are perceived as fun, students may be more likely to attend regularly and maintain active habits over time. This finding supports the idea that campus recreation programs should not be designed only around performance, rules, and competition. Instead, they should create enjoyable experiences that allow students to feel comfortable, successful, and engaged.

Physical fitness was also a major motivation. Many students are aware that regular physical activity can improve strength, endurance, flexibility, and overall body functioning. University life often involves long periods of sitting, studying, and screen use. Recreational sports can help students counteract sedentary habits and maintain a more balanced lifestyle. Fitness-related motivation may also be connected to body image, energy levels, and confidence.

Health maintenance was another highly rated factor. This suggests that students understand the connection between physical activity and long-term health. Recreational sports may help reduce the risk of chronic disease, support immune function, improve cardiovascular health, and enhance overall quality of life. For students, health maintenance may also include mental health benefits, such as improved mood and reduced anxiety.

Stress relief ranked fourth but still received a high mean score. This finding reflects the stressful nature of university life. Students often face academic pressure, social adjustment, financial concerns, and uncertainty about the future. Recreational sports can serve as a coping strategy by providing a break from academic responsibilities and helping

students release tension. Activities such as yoga, gym workouts, running, swimming, and casual team sports may help students feel more relaxed and mentally refreshed.

Social interaction received a moderately high score. While recreational sports can provide important opportunities for friendship and belonging, this factor was not rated as highly as the more personal motives of enjoyment, fitness, health, and stress relief. One possible explanation is that students may already have social networks outside of recreational sports. Another possibility is that many students participate in individual activities such as gym training, running, or yoga, where social interaction may be less central. However, social connection remains an important benefit of recreational sport participation, particularly for students who are new to campus or seeking community.

Competition received the lowest average score. This result is important because it distinguishes recreational sport participants from varsity or elite athletes. While some students enjoy competition, many recreational participants may prefer low-pressure activities where skill level and winning are not the main focus. A strong emphasis on competition may discourage beginners, less confident students, or those who participate mainly for health and stress relief. Therefore, campus recreation programs should provide competitive options without making competition the central feature of all programming.

The findings align with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in motivation. Students may be more motivated when they feel that they have control over their participation, believe they can succeed at the activity, and experience positive connections with others. Recreational sports that are flexible, welcoming, and enjoyable may satisfy these psychological needs and encourage long-term participation.

These results also suggest that universities should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to recreation programming. Students have different interests, skill levels, schedules, and comfort levels. Some may prefer structured intramural leagues, while others may prefer drop-in fitness classes, open gym hours, walking groups, outdoor recreation, or wellness-based programs. Offering diverse options can help institutions reach a wider student population.

Marketing and communication strategies should also reflect student motivations. Promotional messages that emphasize fun, stress reduction, health, and belonging may be more effective than messages focused only on competition or athletic performance. For example, campaigns such as “Move for your mental health,” “Find your fun,” or “Stay active your way” may appeal to students who are motivated by well-being and enjoyment.

In practical terms, universities should create recreational environments that are inclusive and non-intimidating. Beginners should feel welcome, and programs should be accessible to students with different levels of experience. Recreation staff can help by offering beginner-friendly sessions, skill-building workshops, inclusive intramural divisions, and wellness-focused activities.

CONCLUSION

This descriptive study examined the motivational factors influencing participation in recreational sports among university students. The findings showed that enjoyment was the strongest motivation, followed by physical fitness, health maintenance, stress relief, social interaction, and competition. These results suggest that students are primarily motivated by intrinsic enjoyment and personal wellness rather than competitive achievement. The study highlights the value of recreational sports as part of university life. Recreational sports can help students stay active, manage stress, improve health, build confidence, and experience enjoyment outside the classroom. These benefits are especially important in a university environment where students often face academic pressure and lifestyle changes. For universities seeking to increase participation in campus recreation programs, the findings suggest that programs should prioritize inclusive, enjoyable, and wellness-oriented activities. Activities such as yoga, Zumba, hiking clubs, fitness challenges, casual intramurals, open recreation hours, and beginner-friendly sports sessions may attract students who are motivated by fun, fitness, and stress relief. Campus recreation departments should also recognize that competition is not the primary motivation for many students. While competitive leagues should still be available for students who enjoy them, universities should also provide non-competitive and low-pressure options. A balanced program can serve both students who enjoy competition and those who simply want to be active, healthy, and socially connected.

REFERENCES

- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Frederick, C. M., & Ryan, R. M. (1993). Differences in motivation for sport and exercise and their relations with participation and mental health. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 16(3), 124–146.
- Kilpatrick, M., Hebert, E., & Bartholomew, J. (2005). College students' motivation for physical activity: Differentiating men's and women's motives for sport participation and exercise. *Journal of American College Health*, 54(2), 87–94. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JACH.54.2.87-94>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Ryan, R. M., Frederick, C. M., Lepes, D., Rubio, N., & Sheldon, K. M. (1997). Intrinsic motivation and exercise adherence. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 28(4), 335–354.
- Dishman, R. K., Sallis, J. F., & Orenstein, D. R. (1985). The determinants of physical activity and exercise. *Public Health Reports*, 100(2), 158–171.
- Buckworth, J., & Dishman, R. K. (2002). *Exercise psychology*. Human Kinetics.
- Biddle, S. J. H., & Mutrie, N. (2008). *Psychology of physical activity: Determinants, well-being and interventions* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Iso-Ahola, S. E., & St. Clair, B. (2000). Toward a theory of exercise motivation. *Quest*, 52(2), 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2000.10491706>
- Molanorouzi, K., Khoo, S., & Morris, T. (2015). Motives for adult participation in physical activity: Type of activity, age, and gender. *BMC Public Health*, 15, Article 66. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1429-7>
- Gill, D. L., Gross, J. B., & Huddleston, S. (1983). Participation motivation in youth sports. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 14(1), 1–14.
- Markland, D., & Ingledew, D. K. (1997). The measurement of exercise motives: Factorial validity and invariance across gender of a revised Exercise Motivations Inventory. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 2(4), 361–376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8287.1997.tb00549.x>
- Wilson, P. M., Rodgers, W. M., Fraser, S. N., & Murray, T. C. (2004). Relationships between exercise regulations and motivational consequences in university students. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 75(1), 81–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2004.10609136>