INFLUENCES ON DECISION-MAKING

Decisions to take part in sport and physical activity are shaped by a range of social, psychological, and practical influences, rather than by motivation alone. Whether students choose to participate often depends on their everyday context - who they spend time with, how they view themselves, what demands they face on their time, and how easy opportunities feel to access. Research shows that participation is strongly influenced by social factors such as peer networks and a sense of belonging, as well as prior sport experience, physical activity identity, and personal circumstances like living on campus or working fewer hours. Intramural and club sport can play a significant role here, as they offer manageable, voluntary and socially connected ways for students to get involved, helping them feel part of the institution while also supporting academic and social outcomes (Vasold, 2019).

More broadly, students make participation decisions based on how relevant and worthwhile sport feels in their lives. Social media and elite sport can shape what young people aspire to or see as "normal," while peers and family can influence confidence and expectations. Factors such as quality of life, identity and belonging also affect whether sport feels meaningful. At the same time, academic pressure, limited time, and access to resources can reduce participation even when interest is there. Looking at these influences together helps explain why some students stay involved in sport while others drift away, and why participation patterns often reflect life circumstances and experiences as much as personal preference.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

Social media has become a central part of young people's daily lives over the past decade, with use now near-universal; for example, around 95% of 12 to 17-year-olds report using at least one social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2022). Within this digital context, social media is increasingly shaping how young people feel about their bodies, confidence, and willingness to be active. Evidence suggests that heavy use can have meaningful wellbeing consequences. Booker (2015) found that adolescents spending four or more hours per day on social networking sites were 57% less likely to report being happy and more than twice as likely to experience socio-emotional difficulties (OR = 2.38), even after adjusting for confounders. Moderate use (1 to 3 hours per day) was also associated with poorer wellbeing, indicating a dose-response pattern. These findings suggest that digital environments do not simply coexist with participation decisions but can influence the emotional foundations that support or hinder engagement in sport and physical activity.

A cross-sectional study of 2,378 Italian pre-teens by Digennaro (2023) shows that girls are significantly more engaged in appearance-focused behaviours online, such as taking and editing selfies, seeking peer approval, and monitoring likes, which links to greater self-consciousness. The study highlights a "dualism" between virtual and real selves, where many girls wish to look like their filtered images; this gap was negatively associated with body satisfaction and was significant for girls but not boys. Importantly, physical activity was positively associated with body satisfaction for both genders, acting as a protective factor against negative social media effects. However, girls in the sample reported both lower activity levels and lower body

satisfaction overall, and frequent peer comparison on social media further amplified appearance pressures. Together, these findings suggest that social media can undermine confidence and motivation for sport, especially among girls, while also reinforcing the value of physical activity as a buffer for wellbeing and self-perception.

Achmad (2023) provides further insight into how teenagers' motivations and daily lifestyles are shaped in a highly digital environment. In this cross-sectional study, social media use explained 43% of the variation in adolescents' lifestyle patterns, highlighting its significant role in structuring how young people spend their time and attention. High engagement was associated with later sleep patterns, higher consumption behaviours, and more sedentary routines, which together can undermine energy, focus, and the regularity needed for sustained sport participation. Digital culture also shaped identity expression and comparison habits, with teenagers making lifestyle choices in response to online trends and curated images. While social media can expand networks and provide a sense of community, the overall picture is of a strong digital "pull" on time and identity that competes with sport.

At the same time, social media is not only a source of pressure but also a major channel for health and physical activity information. Goodyear (2019) shows that 53% of teenagers actively search for health-related content online, with physical activity (60%) and diet (55%) the most common topics. Engagement is selective. 57–61% often scroll past health posts - yet nearly half (46%) still report changing a health behaviour after exposure. Behaviour is shaped by algorithms, peer posts, likes, and recognised organisations, with peer-generated content especially influential. Around a quarter of young people post health content themselves, and many report comparison and pressure linked to peers' images, while likes function as social validation. Official sources are viewed as most credible and are linked to behaviour change, although celebrities also carry influence. Young people describe mixed outcomes, ranging from increased motivation (43%) to body dissatisfaction and pressure (24%), showing that they actively interpret rather than passively absorb content and that activity is often framed through appearance and short-term results.

These mixed effects are reinforced in Goodyear's (2021) review, which concludes that social media can support positive physical activity change, but outcomes depend on how platforms are used. Interventions are more effective when they emphasise peer interaction, private groups, social support, and features such as challenges, gamification, and wearable integration, whereas passive information sharing has limited impact. Young women are particularly active in these spaces, and while online communities can increase belonging and motivation, they can also intensify comparison and pressure. Across studies, engagement quality, social connection, and perceived safety matter more than platform choice.

Social media has therefore become a major cultural influence on how young people view health, fitness, and sport, often shaping not just behaviours but underlying motivations. Raggatt (2018) found that exposure to "fitspiration" content strongly influenced users' concepts of health, with many equating being healthy with looking fit. While 90% reported that this content motivated them to exercise or eat more healthily, psychological risks were notable: 43% reported high or very high psychological distress, 17.7% were at considerable risk of an eating disorder, and 10.3% showed risk of compulsive exercise. Around a quarter reported negative self-comparisons that reduced confidence and enjoyment of physical activity. Gendered effects were clear, with women more likely to internalise appearance ideals and link self-worth to body image.

Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that social media can both encourage and discourage participation. It can prompt interest, provide information, and foster connection, but it can also erode confidence, increase comparison, and shift motivations toward appearance rather than enjoyment or wellbeing. Digital environments are therefore already shaping how many young people understand and approach physical activity before entering further or higher education, contributing to differences in motivation, confidence, and expectations around sport and health.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Sport participation is consistently associated with higher perceived quality of life (QoL) in university students, and this appears to shape how young people prioritise and choose activities within busy academic lives. Yermakhanov's (2025) cross-sectional study used WHOQoL measures shows that students engaged in either competitive or recreational sport report significantly higher QoL across physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains than non-participants ($p < 0.05$), with particularly strong differences in psychological health and social relationships. Importantly, benefits are evident even in non-elite, "sport-for-all" formats, indicating that regular, enjoyable participation rather than performance level underpins these associations. Gender differences moderate the magnitude but not the direction of effects, and QoL scores often rise with academic progression, suggesting that sport may interact with broader developmental and contextual factors. While cross-sectional designs cannot confirm causality, longitudinal and review evidence supports a bidirectional link: participation can enhance wellbeing, social connectedness, and life satisfaction, while students with higher baseline wellbeing are more likely to remain engaged (e.g., Eime et al., 2013; Biddle & Asare, 2011). Taken together, this literature suggests that perceived quality of life is both an outcome of sport participation and a factor influencing students' decisions to start or continue being active.

Building on evidence that sport participation and quality of life are positively linked, longitudinal research suggests this relationship is bidirectional rather than one-way. In a large US longitudinal panel (N = 14,159), Patrick L. Hill and Gabriela M. Mroczek, reported by Yemiscigil (2020), used cross-lagged models to show that a stronger sense of purpose in life predicted higher physical activity four years later, even after controlling for prior activity. Conversely, higher physical activity predicted future increases in sense of purpose, independent of baseline purpose. These findings were replicated in a second national cohort (N = 4,041) with a nine-year follow-up, strengthening the temporal evidence.

Together, this indicates that physical activity can build psychological resources (e.g., purpose, meaning, wellbeing), while those same resources make sustained engagement in activity more likely. Although based on adult samples, the mechanism is highly relevant to student populations: young people arriving at university with higher wellbeing and clearer purpose may be more inclined to engage in sport, while sport participation itself can further support wellbeing and life satisfaction. This reinforces the view that sport and physical activity function as both a contributor to, and an outcome of, quality of life and psychological wellbeing.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND SOCIAL MOTIVES

A strong sense of belonging and social connection consistently emerges as one of the most important drivers of sport and physical activity participation among young people and university students. Across age groups, students are often motivated less by fitness goals and more by opportunities to connect with others, feel included, and build friendships.

St Quinton (2020) shows that recreational sport participation is often a social decision before it is a fitness decision. Students were more likely to take part when sport felt like an easy route into friendship and community, something that "fits" their day-to-day student life rather than a performance test. Social connection sat alongside enjoyment and confidence: students avoided settings where they expected judgement or embarrassment, but engaged when sessions felt welcoming, relaxed, and pitched so people could join without already being "good at it." In practice, this frames belonging as the mechanism that turns intention into attendance: when students anticipate a friendly, low-pressure social space, they are more willing to show up, try, and keep coming back.[34]

This emphasis on belonging is echoed in wider evidence across both university and school-age populations. The BUCS Student Active Wellbeing Survey (2024–25) explicitly links sport and physical activity with reduced loneliness and a stronger sense of belonging, positioning these social outcomes as part of why activity supports student retention and wellbeing.[35] Beyond higher education, adolescent research also points to belonging as part of the pathway through which physical activity supports resilience and wellbeing, reinforcing that "feeling connected" is not a soft add-on, but rather is closely tied to whether young people stay engaged.[36] For universities, the combined implication is that participation strategies should treat belonging as a design feature: prioritise beginner-friendly entry points, friend-based and small-group formats, and use messaging that signals "you'll be welcomed here" rather than "prove yourself here".

Brown's (2024) systematic review further shows that social factors play a major role in participation decisions. Exercising with friends, peer encouragement, and positive group norms all support participation, while socially supportive environments help activity become habitual. Peer networks therefore act as key facilitators, making sport and physical activity more attractive and sustainable over time.

Cross-cultural evidence reinforces the centrality of social motives. Research with South Korean university students shows that perceived social benefits, such as building relationships and friendships, were more influential in driving participation than traditional health beliefs. Sport was viewed primarily as a social activity rather than a health behaviour, suggesting that targeting social expectations and experiences may be more effective than focusing solely on facilities or health messaging.

Tannehill (2025) adds nuance by showing that many young people retain positive attitudes toward physical activity even as participation declines. Disengagement is more often linked to changing priorities and contextual pressures than to lack of interest. Social connection and being with friends were the strongest motivators, followed by enjoyment and low-pressure fun. Conversely, excessive competitiveness and fear of judgement reduced engagement.

Importantly, the social climate within sport settings can either strengthen or undermine belonging. Witt (2018) shows that coaching practices that heavily prioritise winning, such as

giving limited playing time to less skilled players, can undermine confidence, signal exclusion, and weaken young people's sense of belonging. This is particularly harmful during developmental stages when peer acceptance is especially important.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that belonging is not simply an outcome of participation but a core condition for it. Students are more likely to engage and persist when sport environments feel socially safe, inclusive, and friendship oriented. For universities, this highlights the value of designing sport and activity provision around social integration, supportive cultures, and positive first experiences that allow students to feel they belong from the outset.

FAMILY INFLUENCE

Family environments play a foundational role in shaping young people's attitudes toward sport and physical activity, often setting the tone for whether participation feels normal, supported, and achievable from an early age. Across studies, family influence emerges not only through encouragement but through values, modelling, and the practical conditions that make participation possible.

Standbu's (2019) cross-sectional study in Norway illustrates the strength of this effect. Among 6,121 adolescents, those from families with a strong "sport culture" were around ten times more likely to take part in club-organised sport than those from low-sport-culture families. This influence remained stable from ages 13 to18, indicating a lasting socialisation effect rather than short-term parental control. Yet participation still declined with age, from about 58% of 13-year-olds taking part weekly to around 22% by age 18, showing that even supportive families cannot fully prevent dropout. Parental expectations were high, with around 80% of adolescents reporting that their parents wanted them to play sport, but expectations alone did not guarantee involvement. Instead, shared values and identity appeared more influential than direct pressure. This suggests that early exposure embeds sport as a "normal" part of life, while those without this background face structural disadvantage.

Evidence consistently shows that parental attitudes and behaviours are central to early engagement. Chiarlitti (2017) shows that parental influence is a strong predictor of children's physical activity. Children are more active when parents encourage participation, value physical activity, and model active behaviour themselves, with modelling often proving more influential than verbal encouragement alone. Practical support such as providing transport, paying fees, and enrolling children in organised sport also reduces access barriers, while emotional support and praise help sustain engagement. The study highlights that parental attitudes toward health and wellbeing are transmitted to children, shaping early habits that can persist into adolescence. Chen (2019) similarly shows that teenagers are more active when parents model active lifestyles and provide encouragement, while socioeconomic status shapes access to facilities, equipment and organised opportunities. Together, these findings highlight how early habit formation and unequal access can carry forward into later transitions, including entry to university.

Building on evidence that family environments shape early activity habits, research also shows that parents act as central gatekeepers to children's sport participation. O'Hara (2015) demonstrates that parents strongly influence initial enrolment, continuation, and

decisions to stop or switch sports, largely because children depend on their facilitation. Practical support such as paying fees, providing transport, and managing schedules is often a prerequisite for sustained involvement, while emotional support through encouragement and interest helps maintain motivation and confidence. However, the quality of involvement matters: when parents emphasise enjoyment, learning, and personal development, children report higher satisfaction and retention, whereas excessive performance pressure and a focus on winning can increase stress and contribute to dropout. Parents who recognise social and developmental benefits (e.g., teamwork, discipline, confidence) are more likely to foster positive sport experiences. Together, these findings underline that balanced, enjoyment-focused parental involvement supports continuity, and that educating parents about supportive, non-pressurising behaviours can improve long-term participation.

Handrianto (2024) extends this evidence by showing that parental involvement is not only linked to participation but also to sporting achievement. In this cross-sectional study, students with more engaged parents participated more consistently, reported higher motivation, and achieved stronger sporting outcomes. The most influential forms of involvement were emotional encouragement (praise, interest, confidence-building), practical support (fees, transport, schedule management), and monitoring or guidance to help balance sport with academics. Importantly, the study found that sport and academic success are not inherently in conflict when parents provide structured support. Parental attitudes toward sport also shaped children's own values and persistence, while family resources influenced the level of support possible. Together, these findings highlight that family environments can enable sustained engagement and performance in youth sport, particularly when support is positive, balanced, and development focused.

The type of parental support also matters. Laird's (2016) systematic review shows that family support is more strongly associated with organised sport participation ($r \approx 0.44$) than with general physical activity. Logistical and financial support such as transport, equipment and fees were especially important for sustained engagement. Encouragement and modelling showed smaller but still meaningful effects, while simply being present or co-participating showed no consistent association. This highlights that active facilitation is more important than passive involvement.

At the same time, parental influence can become counterproductive. Witt's (2018) review shows that excessive pressure from adults accelerates disengagement. When parents emphasise winning, perfect performance or recognition, young people report anxiety, reduced enjoyment and loss of autonomy. Parents who project their own ambitions, over-manage participation or focus on outcomes over experience can undermine intrinsic motivation and increase dropout risk. These patterns suggest that how parents support sport matters as much as whether they support it.

Family influence also evolves across adolescence. A literature review by Alonso-Stuyck (2020) positions parents as primary architects of adolescent lifestyle formation, including physical activity and sport. The review shows that 30 to50% of adolescent health behaviours track into adulthood, and that habits internalised during adolescence are up to twice as likely to persist as externally imposed routines. Parenting style is influential: adolescents raised in authoritative, autonomy-supportive homes are 40 to 60% more likely to meet activity guidelines and less likely to accumulate high screen time, while controlling styles are linked to sharp declines once autonomy increases. Across studies, autonomy-supportive parenting was

associated with 1.5 to 2 times higher enjoyment-based activity and stronger sport identity, whereas controlling approaches predicted higher dropout. Parental modelling also matters: adolescents with active parents were up to 70% more likely to be regularly active, independent of socioeconomic status. Together, this suggests that many students arrive at university with pre-formed attitudes and motivation toward sport shaped by family climate, values, and the degree of behavioural autonomy they were allowed to develop.

Complementing this, a longitudinal study by Molborn (2018) shows that children's "health lifestyles" are multidimensional and path-dependent rather than simply healthy or unhealthy. By eighth grade, only 18% of young people showed a consistently healthy lifestyle, and many combined sport participation with high sedentary time, indicating that activity does not automatically displace screen use. Early lifestyles moderately predicted later ones (odds ratios 2 to 10 depending on timing), demonstrating both continuity and scope for change. Family influences (resources, education, parenting practices) were strongest in early childhood but weakened by adolescence, while gender differences widened, with girls increasingly over-represented in lower-activity, higher-sedentary profiles. The findings imply that disengagement from sport often develops gradually from childhood and that early family socialisation sets trajectories that later institutions, including universities, partly inherit rather than create.

This developmental shift is reinforced by longitudinal evidence. Morrissey et al. (2015) found that family support predicted higher MVPA across adolescence even after controlling for sex, socioeconomic status, and maturity. However, family support declined with age ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < .01$), and its influence weakened as peer influence grew. Early patterns were highly stable: adolescents with low family support at age 13 were much more likely to remain low at 17 (boys OR = 6.9; girls OR = 3.7). Although boys reported higher overall support and activity, family support was particularly influential for girls' MVPA.

Lawler (2022) brings these strands together, showing that parents continue to shape adolescent participation, though more indirectly than peers. Logistical support, encouragement, and modelling create the conditions for participation, while peers increasingly shape day-to-day engagement. Parental influence remained stronger for boys through modelling and practical support, while for girls it operated more in the background alongside peer dynamics. Morrissey et al. (2015) likewise found family support predicted higher MVPA but declined with age and weakened as peer influence strengthened.

Overall, this evidence suggests that universities often inherit participation patterns already shaped by family climate, resources, and values. Some students arrive with strong sport identities and habits, while others arrive with limited exposure or support. For universities, this highlights the importance of providing accessible entry points and positive early experiences that can compensate for unequal family sport cultures and help students build new, self-directed relationships with physical activity.

PEER INFLUENCE

While family sets the early foundation, peer and school contexts become more salient with age. Molborn (2018) found suggestive evidence that peer and school environments in primary years were linked to adolescent health lifestyles years later, pointing to the growing role of non-family social settings. As adolescents seek belonging and identity fit, activity patterns

increasingly align with peer norms, which helps explain why participation can rise or fall depending on friendship groups and school cultures. In short, sport participation in adolescence is shaped by a shifting balance: family-driven socialisation early on, followed by stronger peer and contextual influences, meaning that sustained engagement depends on how well sport fits both home and social identities.

Adams et al. (2022) show that peer relationships are a powerful driver of young people's sport and physical activity behaviours, particularly during educational transitions. Health and activity behaviours tend to cluster into "lifestyles" that are socially shared within peer groups. Similarity between friends is driven more by homophilous selection (choosing friends with similar behaviours) than by influence alone, accounting for between 55 and68% of behavioural similarity. In practice, this means adolescents often join friendship groups where activity patterns already match their own, reinforcing either active or inactive lifestyles. Chung (2017) extends this picture, showing that adolescents are more active when their friends are active, when they spend more time together, and when that shared time involves physical activity. Longitudinal evidence indicates peer effects can persist for one to five years. Influence operates through both selection (choosing similar friends) and socialisation (adjusting behaviour to match them), which helps explain why inactivity can cluster and why transitions to new peer groups are pivotal moments for change. The review also highlights that friendship quality matters: best friends and co-participation in sport have stronger effects than wider peer groups. Peer processes shape not only behaviour but also motivation and confidence, with approval and shared participation encouraging activity, and fear of judgement discouraging it. Gender moderates these dynamics: girls' activity is more linked to peer support and social participation, while boys respond more to modelling and encouragement. Overall, as adolescents age, peer influence often outweighs parental influence, underscoring that sport participation is socially embedded and that peer-based, socially supportive approaches are important for sustaining engagement.

Beyond similarity and selection, the *quality* of peer relationships also matters. Morrissey et al.'s (2015) longitudinal study shows that peer support is a strong predictor of adolescents' physical activity, particularly outside school hours. Higher perceived friend support was associated with higher MVPA, and this influence became more important with age as young people spent more time with peers. Support from friends also declined across adolescence ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < .01$), mirroring wider drops in activity. Notably, adolescents with low friend support at age 13 were far more likely to remain in the lowest support group at 17 (boys OR = 13.8; girls OR = 3.7), indicating that peer environments can lock in participation trajectories. Being active *with* friends ("Friend Do") was one of the strongest predictors of MVPA, underlining that shared participation and social belonging are central to sustaining activity. Lawler's (2022) cohort study reinforces this, showing that peer processes are among the strongest predictors of adolescent physical activity, with participation closely tied to social context rather than individual choice alone. Adolescents with active friends, peer encouragement and opportunities for co-participation are more likely to remain active over time, while inactive peer environments can reinforce disengagement. These patterns are especially pronounced for girls, whose participation is strongly linked to supportive, socially oriented friendship groups.

Peer influence is not only behavioural but developmental. MacPherson (2016) shows that organised sport peer groups are a powerful setting for adolescent girls' identity development. Girls used sport to explore their social, physical, and psychological selves, building confidence

and commitment through everyday interactions with teammates. Feeling accepted and valued by peers increased enjoyment and willingness to continue, while exclusion or judgement increased dropout risk. Sport also allowed experimentation with roles such as leader or supporter, helping develop a clearer sense of self. Beyond sport itself, these peer groups strengthened friendships, school engagement, and broader belonging, highlighting sport as a protective social space during adolescence.

Overall, as adolescents age, peer influence often outweighs parental influence, underscoring that sport participation is socially embedded. Sustaining engagement therefore can depend not only on access or motivation, but on whether young people are embedded in supportive, active, and identity-affirming peer networks.

For universities and educational institutions, these findings suggest that efforts to promote student sport and physical activity should recognise how strongly participation is shaped by peer environments. Creating opportunities for students to join sport alongside friends, build new social connections, and feel socially accepted within activities may be as important as the activities themselves. Programmes that emphasise social integration, low-pressure entry points, and peer-led formats, particularly during the first year and other transition points, can help incoming students find a sense of belonging and establish active lifestyles that are more likely to persist.