

NEW OR EMERGING SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES

Alongside established sports, there is growing interest in new and emerging forms of activity such as e-sports, lifestyle and action sports, and other niche activities, which are attracting increasing participation and, in some cases, appealing to groups who are less engaged with traditional sport. Understanding these trends is important for BUCS, as awareness of emerging preferences can help anticipate future demand, diversify provision, and shape an offer that aligns more closely with how students want to be active.

Interviews with adolescents in Western cultures by Thorpe (2016) show a gradual shift away from traditional, highly organised sport towards more informal and self-directed participation. This case study looks at the following emerging sports and why they are increasingly attracting young people: skateboarding, surfing, climbing, BMX/freestyle cycling, snowboarding and parkour. In the UK, skateboarding participation has reached record levels, with estimates of over 560,000 regular participants and around 750,000 participants overall. Recent research also suggests that participation among women and girls has increased substantially in the last 10 years, supported by greater visibility, dedicated programmes and the sport's inclusion in the Olympic Games. Surfing engages around 500,000 participants annually, and broader adventure and outdoor activities, including climbing and other freestyle pursuits, have increased by 75% between 2011 and 2019, pointing to a wider shift in the kinds of physical activities young people engage in.¹

Climbing specifically has seen an increase in youth participation. The British Mountaineering Council reported that participation in its Youth Climbing Series increased by around 50% over five years, indicating growing engagement among young people in climbing activities².

Thorpe (2016) finds that many young people are drawn to non-competitive, flexible activities, in particular young people who don't enjoy conventional team sports. These activities often centre on autonomy, creativity, and enjoyment, with an emphasis on personal progression rather than winning. This focus on self-expression and freedom helps explain why some young people disengage from rule-bound, performance-driven models of sport during adolescence.

The study also finds that informal and emerging sports can foster a sense of belonging without the need for formal clubs, as social connection often develops through peer-led participation that feels more accessible and authentic. With less emphasis on selection and comparison, these formats reduce pressure and are particularly appealing for those with lower confidence, girls, and marginalised groups. Action and lifestyle sports may offer more gender-inclusive environments by prioritising creativity, balance, and coordination, which can help reduce traditional barriers when appropriately supported. Their flexible, self-paced nature also makes them easier to sustain across transitions such as moving into higher education. For many young people, involvement becomes part of their identity and lifestyle rather than just an organised activity.

¹ <https://skateboardgb.org/faq/how-many-people-skate-in-the-uk/>

² https://services.thebmc.co.uk/participation-in-climbing-mountaineering?utm_source

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In challenging contexts, participation has also been linked to emotional regulation, resilience, and coping, highlighting benefits beyond physical health. Qualitative research with young women skateboarders found that the focus and flow involved in skateboarding -- concentrating on tricks, balance, and movement -- helped participants experience a sense of calm, reduce intrusive thoughts, and feel present in the moment, effectively providing a coping mechanism and mental respite from stressful life events. Many participants also described how being part of skateboarding communities enhanced their confidence, social connection, and overall sense of wellbeing, demonstrating emotional benefits that extend beyond physical health.³

Janečková's (2021) cross-sectional study involving 679 adolescents in different school years in Czechia shows that lifestyle sport activities can engage young people who do not take part in organised sport. Weekly participation in at least one lifestyle sport was associated with higher moderate-to-vigorous physical activity ($\beta = 0.56$) and greater out-of-school vigorous activity (OR = 1.75), with stronger effects for those involved in two or more leisure sport activities (LSAs) moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA $\beta = 1.13$; VPA OR = 2.27). Around 36% of adolescents reported weekly LSA participation, and over 100 participants in the study engaged in LSAs without any organised sport involvement, indicating these activities attract those outside traditional systems. Participation in multiple LSAs was also linked to lower sedentary time (OR = 0.40). Although boys were more likely to participate, benefits were evident for both genders, and socioeconomic status showed little influence, suggesting relatively low access barriers. Examples discussed include activities such as skateboarding and other informal, peer-led pursuits. The authors highlight that autonomy, enjoyment and social orientation underpin engagement, and recommend investment in facilities like skateparks and outdoor spaces to support these forms of participation.

Gilchrist's (2016) literature review of young people in the UK reinforces and extends the shift toward new and emerging forms of participation identified by Thorpe, strengthening the case that youth participation is evolving toward flexible, identity-driven and socially grounded forms of activity, supporting the need for sport systems to adapt rather than assume disengagement. Gilchrist's review highlights growing engagement in informal and self-directed activities such as skateboarding, parkour and surfing, particularly among teenagers and young adults who feel constrained by the rules and selection pressures of organised sport. The review also finds that informal spaces such as parks and urban environments are valued because they allow autonomy and social connection away from adult control. However, the review cautions that lifestyle and niche sports are not automatically inclusive. Despite growth in female participation, many spaces still reflect masculine and middle-class norms, and girls or minoritised groups may face conditional acceptance.

Gilchrist further notes that participation pathways are fluid rather than linear, with young people moving between formal and informal settings and varying their level of commitment over time. This perspective supports the idea that transitions (such as moving from school to university) do not always represent dropout, but sometimes a change in sport or activity.

Wheaton's (2022) literature review support these findings, highlighting how action and lifestyle sports have become a significant part of youth leisure worldwide, increasingly challenging the dominance of traditional organised sport. They find that learning

³ <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/about-us/news/news-articles/2024/08/skateboarding-shown-to-benefit-mental-health-of-young-women>

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in these sports is peer-led and self-directed, with young people often using digital media to film, share and refine skills, and participation playing a strong role in identity formation. They also note that participation is showing continuous growth, with some disciplines becoming more professionalised through events such as the X Games and Olympic inclusion and more structured training and coaching are emerging.

Geckle (2025) describes how skateboarding has moved from a marginal, countercultural activity into a more mainstream form of physical activity, with Olympic inclusion since Tokyo 2020 playing a key role in raising visibility, legitimacy, and youth interest. The report highlights that skateboarding has low barriers to entry - requiring minimal equipment, flexible spaces, and no formal facilities to begin - which supports uptake, particularly in urban areas where traditional sport facilities may be limited. Its appeal is closely linked to youth culture, creativity, and self-expression, attracting young people who may feel less drawn to structured team sports. Skateboarding is also shown to intersect with identity, culture, and the use of urban space, while participation among girls and diverse groups is growing, even if inclusion is not automatic. For schools and universities, these findings suggest that recognising and supporting informal, lifestyle sports like skateboarding can widen participation, engage students beyond traditional sport pathways, and provide alternative routes for community-building and personal development, especially where flexible and low-cost options are needed.

This shift toward informal and lifestyle sports also reflects wider changes at elite and policy levels. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has increasingly placed action sports at the centre of its strategy to engage younger audiences, fast-tracking the inclusion of disciplines such as snowboarding, BMX and skateboarding within Olympic programmes. As action sports gained spectatorship, the IOC has shown greater willingness to collaborate with participants to preserve elements that matter to these communities, including creativity, individuality and less formalised styles of participation. The inclusion of skateboarding and related sports aligns with the IOC's Olympic Agenda 2020 reforms, which were designed to make the Olympic movement more relevant to younger generations and to "take sport to the youth" by embracing activities that better reflect contemporary youth culture and participation trends⁴. Together with the growth of skateboarding at community level, this signals a broader legitimisation of action sports and reinforces their value as entry points for young people who may not connect with traditional sport formats.

Wallace (2020) similarly shows that participation in some non-mainstream sports is rarely a spontaneous choice at university but is often rooted in early family socialisation and cultural exposure. Students introduced to activities such as hunting and shooting by parents or relatives were far more likely to continue later, with engagement linked to lifestyle, identity, outdoor culture, and tradition rather than purely competitive motives. This reinforces the idea that for some students, sport functions as part of identity and cultural belonging, not just organised participation.

EMERGENCE OF NICHE SPORTS

⁴ https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Olympic_Agenda_2020/Olympic_Agenda_2020-20-20_Recommendations-ENG.pdf

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Heins (2024) shows how niche sports can move from obscurity to wider recognition, using floorball in Germany as a case study of how this transition happens. Growth was driven by gradual legitimisation through organised leagues, federations and competitions, alongside institutional recognition and support from schools, universities and national governing bodies. Media exposure, international events and social media also helped normalise the sport. Participation was largely youth- and student-led, with many drawn to floorball as an alternative to traditional sports, valuing its lower pressure, fewer stereotypes and more modern, social culture. Mixed-gender formats and low entry barriers further broadened its appeal. For universities, the study highlights their role as entry points and innovation hubs for emerging sports, showing that offering novel, low-barrier, social activities can engage students who might otherwise avoid mainstream sport. For NGBs of niche sports, the findings underline the importance of institutional partnerships, visible competition structures and youth-focused pathways to build legitimacy and sustained growth.

Building on evidence that niche sports can widen participation, Chen (2025) shows that they can also play a role in supporting social mobility, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Latin American contexts where mainstream sports such as football are highly competitive and resource-intensive, niche sports, in this case futsal, skateboarding and climbing, were found to act as a “smaller pond,” with lower entry barriers and less intense competition for places. These sports required relatively low-cost equipment, shared facilities or adaptable spaces, and were often delivered through schools, community programmes or NGOs, making them more accessible to young people from low-income households. Participation was linked not only to sporting progression but to wider benefits, including social networks, mentorship, leadership skills and access to educational, scholarship or travel opportunities. Because these sports are less tied to early specialisation and rigid talent pathways, late starters and those from non-traditional sporting backgrounds can still progress. For universities, this suggests that investing in low-cost, flexible niche sports can support widening participation, inclusion and belonging, while also contributing to students’ personal development and confidence. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, niche sports may offer realistic and supportive entry points into active lifestyles and campus sport.

Alongside shifts toward informal and lifestyle activities, several newer racquet and small-sided sports have seen particularly rapid growth, illustrating how participation trends are evolving toward social, flexible and easily accessible formats. Padel and pickleball are good examples of niche racquet sports that have moved quickly into the mainstream, largely because they fit modern “social sport” settings (leisure centres, commercial clubs, pop-up urban courts, and community venues) and are easy to adopt without long lead-in pathways. In Great Britain, the LTA reports 400,000+ people played padel in 2024, with around 8 million saying they are interested in trying it, reflecting fast-growing demand alongside rapid court expansion.²⁴ In England, Sport England’s Active Lives reporting has also started tracking emerging racquet sports, with summaries indicating around 27,000 adults tried pickleball at least once in the year, and around 20,000 played at least twice in the survey month, suggesting a smaller but relatively regular participant base²⁵. In the US, The Sports & Fitness Industry Association participation data shows how quickly pickleball has scaled up, with participation rising by 51.8% from 2022 to 2023 and 223.5% over three years, with²⁶,²⁷ Importantly, the sport is no longer dominated by older adults: more than one million additional children under the age of 18 took up pickleball between 2022 and 2023, while participation rates are now

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highest among teenagers and young adults aged 13–24. Globally, padel's growth is also evident.²⁷ For universities, this pattern suggests that demand is increasingly shaped by what is visible, bookable and socially oriented on or near campus, and that emerging sports can scale quickly when they are low-barrier, time-efficient and embedded in student social environments rather than traditional club structures.

Emerging sports trends beyond padel and pickleball also point to a range of activities gaining traction because they are accessible, social and adaptable to a variety of settings, including youth and university environments. Teqball has seen rapid formal recognition globally, with its governing body and world championships attracting participants from over 58 countries, highlighting how hybrid sports can build international competitive communities.²⁸ Gaga ball remains a highly inclusive, fast-paced game that engages players of all skill levels with minimal equipment or space required. Footgolf has expanded particularly among young adults, with a high proportion of players aged between 18 and 35, and spikeball has grown as a popular social outdoor activity among youth and collegiate communities.²⁹

For universities and NGBs, these trends suggest that broadening sport offerings to include such emerging formats can attract participants who may be less engaged with traditional sports, fill facility utilisation gaps, and provide diverse pathways for social connection, community building, and lifelong physical engagement.