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The current status of motivation for participation in physical education and sports activities among students of the school of foreign languages: Thai Nguyen University

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Abstract

Physical activity plays an important role in promoting physical and mental health among university students. This study aimed to examine motivations for participation in physical activity among students of the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire, and descriptive statistical analysis was applied. The results indicate that intrinsic motivations were the primary drivers of participation, particularly health improvement, stress reduction, and physical fitness enhancement. In contrast, extrinsic factors such as institutional requirements, peer influence, and opportunities for competition showed a lower level of impact. However, regular participation in physical activity remained limited, mainly due to time constraints, academic pressure, and lack of personal motivation. These findings suggest the need for physical activity programs tailored to the characteristics of foreign language students to promote sustained engagement.

Keywords: Physical activity, motivation, university students, participation behavior, school of foreign languages, Thai Nguyen University

Introduction

Physical activity is widely recognized as a key determinant of physical health, mental well-being, and academic functioning among university students. Regular engagement in physical activity contributes to improved cardiovascular health, reduced stress, enhanced cognitive performance, and better overall quality of life. Despite these well-documented benefits, insufficient physical activity remains prevalent among university students worldwide, particularly in academic environments characterized by heavy workloads and sedentary learning patterns.

Previous studies have consistently reported that students' participation in physical activity is strongly influenced by motivational factors. According to Self-Determination Theory, motivation can be broadly classified into intrinsic motivation, which is driven by personal interest and internal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which arises from external demands or rewards. Empirical evidence suggests that intrinsic motivations, such as health improvement, enjoyment, and stress reduction, are more strongly associated with sustained physical activity participation than extrinsic factors such as institutional requirements or peer pressure. However, the relative importance of these motivational dimensions may vary across educational contexts, disciplines, and cultural settings.

In Vietnam, research on physical activity among university students has primarily focused on participation levels and general health outcomes, while fewer studies have examined motivational determinants in specific academic contexts. Students majoring in foreign languages represent a distinctive group due to their high academic demands, intensive language practice, and limited opportunities for structured physical activity. Understanding their motivations for participating in physical activity is therefore essential for designing effective, context-sensitive interventions.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the motivations for participation in physical activity among students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen

University. By identifying key motivational drivers and barriers, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence to inform the development of student-centered physical activity programs in higher education.

Research Methods

This study employed the following research methods: literature review and analysis, interview method, and statistical-mathematical analysis.

Research Results and Discussion

The study surveyed 625 students from the School of Foreign Languages-Thai Nguyen University regarding their motivation to participate in sports activities. The results are presented in the following tables:

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Students

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	77	12.3
Female	548	87.7

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that female students account for the majority of the sample (87.7%), whereas male students represent only 12.3%. This gender

imbalance may reflect the specific characteristics of foreign language-related academic programs and may also influence students' motivations and behaviors related to physical activity. Previous studies have shown that gender is a significant factor affecting physical activity habits; male students tend to engage in higher-intensity and more competitive forms of exercise, whereas female students are more likely to participate in physical activity for health maintenance, aesthetic purposes, and stress reduction (Huang & Humphreys, 2016; Sallis *et al.*, 2016) [4, 9].

Table 2: Current Health Status of Students

Health status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very good	78	22.5
Good	376	60.2
Average	162	25.9
Poor	9	1.4

Regarding health status, the majority of students self-reported their health as good to very good (82.7%). This indicates that the surveyed population possesses an adequate level of physical fitness to participate in physical activity and sports, which may facilitate the development of regular exercise habits.

Table 3: Frequency of Students' Participation in Physical Activity and Sports

Frequency	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	47	7.5
3-4 sessions/week	105	16.8
1-2 sessions/week	292	46.7
Irregular	181	29.0

The frequency of participation in physical activity and sports was relatively low among students. Only 7.5% reported exercising daily, and 16.8% engaged in physical activity three to four times per week. The majority of students exercised one to two times per week (46.7%) or did so irregularly (29.0%). This discrepancy between students' awareness of the importance of physical activity and their

actual behavior reflects a gap between knowledge and exercise habits, which is consistent with previous studies conducted among university students (Choi *et al.*, 2019; Sallis *et al.*, 2016) [1, 9]. The main barriers reported were lack of time (66.4%), academic pressure (41.6%), and insufficient personal motivation (55.5%), while inadequate facilities also constituted a notable constraint (31.4%).

Table 4: Students' Motivations for Participating in Physical Activity and Sports

Motivation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improving health and preventing diseases	475	76.0
Developing physical fitness and body shape	364	58.2
Reducing academic stress and tension	327	52.3
Satisfying personal interests and enjoyment	193	30.9
Social interaction and relationship building	174	27.8
Fulfilling physical education course requirements	334	53.4

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that health- and mental well-being-related factors were the dominant motivations for participation in physical activity and sports. Specifically, 76.0% of students reported engaging in physical activity to improve health, 58.2% to enhance physical fitness, and 52.3% to reduce academic stress. In

contrast, social interaction and personal enjoyment were reported less frequently (27.8-30.9%). These findings suggest that intrinsic motivations related to health and psychological well-being predominate, which is consistent with previous research among female university students (Huang & Humphreys, 2016) [4].

Table 5: Level of Influence of Factors on Students' Decisions to Participate in Physical Activity and Sports

Factor	Level of influence							
	No influence		Slight influence		Moderate		Influence	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Improving health	33	5.3	28	4.5	176	28.2	237	37.9
Improving body shape	35	5.6	59	9.4	185	29.6	240	38.4
Stress relief	56	9.0	58	9.3	229	36.6	189	30.2
Peer influence	95	15.2	118	18.9	222	35.5	140	22.4
Institutional requirements	48	7.7	75	12.0	209	33.4	192	30.7
Competition and performance opportunities	161	25.8	99	15.8	189	30.2	130	20.8

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that personal health-related factors were the primary drivers influencing students' decisions to participate in physical activity and sports. Specifically, improving health was rated as "influential" or "strongly influential" by 62.1% of students, while improving body shape accounted for 55.4%. Stress relief was also considered an important factor by 45.1% of respondents, reflecting students' need for psychological balance and stress reduction in the context of academic pressure. In contrast, external factors such as peer influence (30.4%), competition and performance opportunities (28.2%), and institutional requirements (46.9%) exerted a relatively weaker influence. These findings suggest that students' participation in physical activity and sports is primarily driven by intrinsic motivations related to personal health and mental well-being rather than by social environment or competitive pressure. Overall, the results reflect a high level of autonomy in students' choices of physical activity, with health maintenance and psychological comfort identified as the top priorities.

Table 6: Students' Level of Interest in Physical Activity and Sports

Level of interest	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very interested	70	11.2
Interested	189	30.2
Neutral	318	50.9
Slightly interested	37	5.9
Not interested	11	1.8

Table 6 shows that the majority of students (50.9%) reported a neutral level of interest in physical activity and sports, while only 11.2% were very interested and 30.2% expressed interest. Approximately 7.7% of students reported low or no interest. These findings indicate a gap between students' awareness of the importance of physical activity and their actual interest in participation. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies among university students, where engagement in physical activity is often constrained by time limitations, academic pressure, and the availability of supportive exercise environments (Choi *et al.*, 2019; Sallis *et al.*, 2016) [1, 9].

Table 7: Factors Motivating Students to Maintain Regular Participation in Physical Activity and Sports

Reason	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Perceived improvement in health	458	73.3
Feeling relaxed and happy after exercise	364	58.2
Desire for self-improvement	367	58.7
Encouragement from family and peers	161	25.8
Favorable exercise environment and facilities	195	31.2

The results in Table 7 indicate that intrinsic factors played a dominant role in motivating students to maintain regular participation in physical activity and sports. Specifically, 73.3% of students reported continuing exercise due to perceived improvements in health, 58.7% due to a desire for self-improvement, and 58.2% because of positive feelings such as relaxation and enjoyment after exercise. In contrast, external factors, including encouragement from family and peers (25.8%) and favorable exercise environments and facilities (31.2%), exerted a more limited influence. These

findings suggest that intrinsic motivation is a key determinant of sustained engagement in physical activity, which is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [2] and previous studies on physical activity motivation among university students.

Table 8: Barriers Affecting Students' Motivation to Participate in Physical Activity and Sports

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of time	415	66.4
Academic pressure	260	41.6
Inadequate facilities	196	31.4
Lack of exercise partners	252	40.3
Lack of personal motivation	347	55.5
Lack of physical aptitude	1	0.2

The results presented in Table 8 indicate that the main barriers to participation in physical activity and sports were lack of time (66.4%), lack of personal motivation (55.5%), academic pressure (41.6%), and lack of exercise partners (40.3%). Inadequate facilities accounted for 31.4%, while almost no students considered a lack of physical aptitude to be a barrier. Overall, time constraints, academic pressure, and intrinsic motivation emerged as the most significant obstacles to maintaining regular physical activity. These findings are consistent with previous studies on university students, which have reported that sustained engagement in physical activity is often hindered by academic schedules and social environmental factors (Huang & Humphreys, 2016) [4].

Table 9: Students' Perceptions of the Role of Physical Activity and Sports in Health

Perceived role	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very important	320	51.2
Important	250	40
Neutral	49	7.8
Slightly important	4	0.6
Not important	0	0.0

The results in Table 9 show that the majority of students perceived physical activity and sports as either "very important" (51.2%) or "important" (40.0%) for health. Only 7.8% rated it as neutral, and 0.6% considered it slightly important, while no students regarded physical activity and sports as unimportant. These findings confirm a high level of awareness among students regarding the role of physical activity in promoting both physical and mental health, reflecting a broad consensus on the positive relationship between regular exercise and overall well-being within the student population.

Table 10: Students' Level of Expectation Toward the University Regarding the Enhancement of Physical Activity and Sports Activities

Level of expectation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very high expectation	121	19.4
High expectation	198	31.7
Neutral	257	41.1
Low expectation	49	7.8

The results presented in Table 10 indicate that a proportion of students expressed high or very high expectations for the university to strengthen physical activity and sports activities (51.1%). However, the largest group of students reported a neutral level of expectation (41.1%), while 7.8% indicated low expectations. These findings suggest that although many students recognize the importance of institutional support for physical activity, a substantial proportion may remain uncertain about the university's role or capacity in promoting sports participation.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the motivational factors influencing physical activity participation among foreign language students. Overall, intrinsic motivations emerged as the dominant drivers of participation, with health improvement, stress reduction, and physical fitness enhancement being the most influential factors. This pattern is consistent with previous research indicating that health-related and psychological benefits are central to students' engagement in physical activity and are more predictive of sustained participation than external incentives.

The relatively low influence of extrinsic motivations, such as institutional requirements, peer influence, and opportunities for competition, suggests that students' participation decisions are largely self-determined rather than socially imposed. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that autonomous motivation fosters greater persistence and adherence to physical activity behaviors. In the context of foreign language education, where academic pressure and time constraints are prominent, students may prioritize activities perceived as directly beneficial to their personal well-being rather than those driven by external expectations.

Despite positive motivational orientations, the overall level of regular physical activity participation remained limited. Time constraints and academic pressure were identified as major barriers, reflecting the intensive nature of language-focused curricula. This finding echoes previous studies reporting that heavy academic workloads and scheduling conflicts significantly reduce students' opportunities for regular physical activity. The coexistence of strong intrinsic motivation and low participation frequency highlights a structural gap between motivation and behavior, indicating that motivation alone is insufficient without supportive environmental conditions.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that higher education institutions should move beyond compulsory or uniform physical education requirements and adopt more flexible, student-centered approaches. Physical activity programs tailored to the schedules, preferences, and academic demands of foreign language students may help translate intrinsic motivation into sustained behavior. Emphasizing stress relief, health maintenance, and enjoyment rather than performance or competition may further enhance engagement.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by contextualizing motivational determinants of physical activity within a specific academic discipline and cultural setting. The results underscore the importance of aligning institutional strategies with students' intrinsic motivations to promote long-term physical activity participation in higher education.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that university students demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding the role of physical activity and sports in promoting physical and mental health; however, their actual levels of interest and participation frequency remain limited. This discrepancy reflects a clear gap between students' awareness and their exercise behaviors within the higher education context.

Participation in and maintenance of physical activity are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations, such as improving health, reducing stress, and pursuing self-improvement, whereas social and environmental factors play a supportive role. The main barriers identified include time constraints, academic pressure, lack of personal motivation, and limited social interaction during exercise. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing the importance of autonomous motivation in fostering sustainable physical activity behaviors.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that higher education institutions should develop flexible physical activity programs aligned with students' academic schedules and characteristics, while simultaneously enhancing intrinsic motivation and social engagement. Such efforts may contribute to the development of long-term physical activity habits and promote students' overall well-being in the university setting.

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