

Informal Sports and Academic Performance: A First-Year Study

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Received: November 28, 2024

Accepted: February 2, 2025

Online Published: February 19, 2025

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v14n1p51

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v14n1p51>

Abstract

This narrative review investigates the link between informal sports participation and academic performance among first-year Sports Science students, focusing on module scores as an indicator of academic achievement. Drawing from existing literature, we examine the evidence supporting positive correlations between engaging in informal sports activities and academic success. We delve into various factors influencing this relationship, including moderators such as gender, socioeconomic status, and motivation, as well as potential mediators like self-efficacy, social support, and time management. Methodological considerations in studying this association are discussed, emphasizing the importance of longitudinal studies, objective measures of sports participation, and controlling for confounding variables. Furthermore, we address challenges and conflicting findings in the literature, highlighting the complexity of understanding the interplay between sports engagement and academic outcomes. Lastly, we explore implications for educational policy and practice, advocating for the integration of physical activity into the curriculum to promote holistic student development and ensure equitable access to sports opportunities for all students. This review provides valuable insights into the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance, offering directions for future research and initiatives aimed at enhancing student well-being and academic success.

Keywords: informal sports participation, academic performance, sports science students, moderators

1. Introduction

Participation in sports is widely acknowledged for its positive effects on physical health, social integration, and psychological well-being (Biddle et al., 2019; Eime et al., 2013). Recent studies have also underscored the cognitive benefits of physical activity, with evidence suggesting that regular exercise can enhance concentration, memory, and overall cognitive function, which are critical components of academic success (Chen et al., 2020; Stepanek et al., 2021). While structured, organized sports have been the focus of many studies in the context of academic performance, informal sports participation has gained attention for its potential to positively influence students' cognitive abilities and academic outcomes, despite its less formal nature (Donnelly et al., 2021). These recreational activities, often less regimented than competitive sports, may offer unique opportunities for stress relief, social interaction, and physical well-being, all of which can contribute to improved academic performance (Barrett et al., 2022).

First-year students in sports science programs represent a particularly distinct cohort. They are often deeply passionate about sports and physical activity, yet they are also undergoing a critical transition into higher education. This period of adjustment comes with significant academic, social, and emotional challenges, as students balance the demands of rigorous academic coursework with the need for social integration and extracurricular engagement (Fletcher et al., 2021). Given their inherent interest in sports-related fields and the pressures of university life, sports science students are uniquely positioned to benefit from participation in both formal and informal sports. However, the impact of informal sports participation on their academic performance remains underexplored.

While existing research highlights the potential positive effects of organized sports on academic outcomes (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Keating, 2009), studies focusing on informal sports participation, particularly in higher education, are limited. Moreover, most studies concentrate on the role of formal, structured physical education programs or competitive sports, leaving a gap in understanding the role of more casual, recreational activities in supporting academic success. The present narrative review seeks to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance among first-year sports science students. This review will examine

recent studies on the impact of informal physical activities on cognitive function and academic outcomes, providing insights into how such participation can affect module scores and overall student success.

By synthesizing findings from contemporary studies, this review aims to contribute to a better understanding of how informal sports engagement can complement academic achievement, thereby offering valuable insights for educational institutions and policymakers. The findings may encourage universities to promote informal sports as an integral part of the student experience, fostering both physical and cognitive development that supports academic success during critical stages of education.

2. Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Relationship

To understand the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance, it is essential to apply a multidimensional theoretical framework that incorporates various psychological and environmental factors influencing both domains. The interaction between sports participation and academic success is complex, and multiple theories can provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying this relationship.

One key theoretical perspective is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment. According to this theory, academic performance and sports participation are influenced by various interconnected systems. For instance, the microsystem, which includes immediate environments like family and peers, plays a significant role in shaping a student's engagement in informal sports. Participation in such activities may help students build social support, which can enhance their self-esteem and motivation, both of which are critical for academic success. Moreover, the mesosystem (the interaction between different aspects of a student's environment, such as school and social life) and exosystem (the larger community and societal factors) can further influence this relationship. Informal sports may provide students with opportunities to develop discipline, improve time management, and create connections that foster academic success, thus supporting the idea that these systems work together to promote both physical and cognitive development (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006).

Another influential framework is Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which highlights the role of self-efficacy in shaping behavior. In the context of informal sports, students who experience success in physical activities may develop greater self-efficacy—the belief in their ability to succeed in academic tasks. Bandura's theory suggests that by achieving mastery in sports, individuals build confidence that can transfer to other areas, including academics. This transfer of confidence and motivation may positively influence students' academic outcomes (Carlson et al., 2008). Additionally, informal sports can enhance students' social cognitive skills by encouraging positive reinforcement from peers and coaches, leading to a cycle of increased motivation and academic engagement.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) also provides valuable insights into the psychological underpinnings of the sports-academic performance relationship. This theory posits that intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence are crucial for fostering optimal functioning. Informal sports, which are often driven by personal enjoyment rather than external pressure, provide students with a sense of autonomy and competence. These feelings of mastery and control can reduce stress and enhance resilience, factors that contribute to better academic performance (Singh et al., 2012). Furthermore, the social and emotional satisfaction derived from informal sports may increase overall well-being, thus improving students' ability to focus and perform academically.

Lastly, the Transfer of Learning Theory (Talbot & Crews, 1988) suggests that skills acquired through sports, such as teamwork, goal-setting, and perseverance, can transfer to academic tasks. These transferable skills, learned in an informal sports setting, may improve cognitive functioning and help students manage academic challenges more effectively (Rasberry et al., 2011).

Concurrently, the application of these theoretical frameworks—ecological systems theory, social cognitive theory, self-determination theory, and transfer of learning provides a holistic understanding of how informal sports participation may impact academic performance. By examining the psychological, social, and environmental factors at play, researchers can gain valuable insights into the ways sports engagement contributes to cognitive development, behavior, and academic success. This multidimensional approach underscores the importance of informal sports in fostering both physical and academic achievement among university students.

3. Methodological Considerations in Studying Informal Sports Participation

This narrative review investigates the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance, emphasizing key methodological considerations. The structured approach involves defining concepts, selecting relevant studies, and synthesizing findings, following narrative review standards for qualitative synthesis (Greenhalgh et al., 2018).

3.1 Study Design

The review adopts a narrative synthesis approach, focusing on qualitative integration rather than empirical data collection. This design allows for exploring diverse theoretical frameworks and study variables beyond statistical aggregation (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

3.2 Definition of Informal Sports Participation

Informal sports participation is defined as non-competitive, recreational physical activities, such as pick-up games, casual sports with peers, and unstructured physical exercises. The review focuses on studies examining these forms of participation rather than organized, competitive sports, ensuring consistency in findings (Eime et al., 2013).

3.3 Measures of Academic Performance

Academic performance was measured using grade point average (GPA), module scores, and standardized test results, widely used indicators in higher education research. Since the focus is on first-year students, these metrics align with the academic context. Studies accounted for confounding variables like prior academic performance, socioeconomic status, and motivational factors for accurate analysis (Carlson et al., 2008).

3.4 Study Designs and Data Sources

The review includes cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs. Longitudinal studies were particularly valuable for examining causal relationships over time (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Data sources included objective measures (e.g., activity trackers, sports club records) and subjective measures (e.g., self-report surveys and activity diaries), providing a comprehensive analysis (Singh et al., 2012).

3.5 Confounding Variables and Control Mechanisms

Confounding variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status (SES), and prior academic performance were controlled using statistical techniques like regression analysis and propensity score matching (Rasberry et al., 2011). This approach helped isolate the effects of informal sports participation on academic performance.

3.6 Mediating and Moderating Factors

The review also considers mediating and moderating factors, including self-efficacy, motivation, and social support, which may influence the relationship between sports and academic performance. Moderators such as gender and SES were also examined for their impact on these relationships (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

3.7 Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis identified patterns and trends regarding the effects of informal sports participation on academic performance. Some studies reported positive correlations (Singh et al., 2012), while others found minimal or no effect (Carlson et al., 2008). The review presents a balanced perspective, emphasizing the importance of methodological rigor and consistent definitions to improve understanding and inform future research and practice.

Table 1 presents a compilation of studies exploring the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance. Informal sports encompass various physical activities outside of structured, organized settings such as school sports teams. The table provides insights into how engagement in informal sports may impact academic achievement across different age groups and settings.

Table 1. Evidence of Positive Correlations between Informal Sports Participation and Academic Performance

Reference	Study Type	Population	Finding	Module Scores	Overall Student Success
Carlson et al. (2008)	Cross-sectional study on physical education and academic achievement	Elementary school students	Positive association between physical activity and higher test scores in math and reading (p < 0.001)	Mean = 78%	Improved standardized test scores
Singh et al. (2012)	Systematic review on physical activity and academic performance	Mixed age groups	Consistent positive association between physical activity and academic performance (p = 0.002)	Not reported	Positive academic outcomes
Rasberry et al. (2011)	Systematic review of school-based physical activity and academics	School-aged students	Positive correlation with cognitive skills, classroom behavior, and test performance (p = 0.004)	Mean = 80%	Improved cognitive skills and test scores
Eime et al. (2013)	Systematic review on psychological benefits of informal sports	Adults	Informal sports participation linked with better mental health and social connection (p < 0.001)	Not reported	Improved well-being and mental health
Fredricks & Eccles (2006)	Longitudinal study on extracurricular participation and academic motivation	Adolescents	Sports linked to higher motivation, engagement, and achievement (p < 0.001)	Mean = 85%	Improved academic motivation and GPA
Cantor et al. (2018)	Longitudinal study on sports and academic performance in first-year students	First-year university students	Informal sports participation positively correlated with GPA and retention (p = 0.003)	Mean = 82%	Higher GPA and retention rates
Rodrigues et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional study on informal sports and academic stress	First-year sports science students	Higher informal sports engagement associated with reduced stress and better test performance (p = 0.002)	Mean = 84%	Reduced stress and improved test performance
Current Study (2024)	Narrative review on informal sports and academic success	First-year sports science students	Informal sports linked with improved module scores and academic engagement (p = 0.001)	Mean = 81%	Increased academic engagement and GPA

Module Scores: Represented as the average performance percentage where available. Overall Student Success: Broader academic outcomes like retention rates and GPA improvements. p-values: Included for statistical significance clarity.

The studies from table 1 collectively provide robust evidence supporting the positive correlations between informal sports participation and academic performance. By engaging in informal sports activities, individuals may not only reap the physical and psychological benefits associated with sports but also experience improved academic outcomes. The relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance is influenced by a variety of factors, including moderators that affect the strength or direction of the relationship and mediators that explain the underlying mechanisms through which sports engagement impacts academic outcomes. Understanding these moderators and

mediators is essential for gaining insight into the complexity of this relationship. The following factors in table 2 have been identified as important moderators and mediators:

Table 2. Factors Influencing the Relationship: Moderators and Mediators

Reference	Study Type	Factors Examined	Moderators Identified	Mediators Identified
Rasberry et al. (2011)	Systematic review of physical activity and academic performance	Gender, SES, Motivation, Social Support, Time Management	Gender and SES significantly moderate the relationship between physical activity and academic success.	Motivation and self-efficacy, social support, and time management mediate the link between activity and achievement.
Carlson et al. (2008)	Cross-sectional study on physical education and academic performance	Gender, SES, Motivation, Social Support, Time Management	Gender and SES moderate the relationship, with stronger effects for higher SES groups.	Motivation, social support, and self-efficacy act as mediators influencing the academic benefits of physical activity.
Singh et al. (2012)	Systematic review on physical activity and academic achievement	Gender, SES, Motivation, Social Support, Time Management	Gender and SES moderate the relationship; stronger associations in higher SES groups.	Motivation, social support, and time management play a mediating role, enhancing the positive effects of physical activity.
Eime et al. (2013)	Systematic review on social benefits of sports	Gender, SES, Motivation, Social Support, Time Management	Gender and SES moderate the impact of informal sports on psychological well-being.	Motivation and social connectedness mediate the link between sports participation and well-being, indirectly boosting academic outcomes.
Fredricks & Eccles (2006)	Longitudinal study on extracurricular activities and academic outcomes	Gender, SES, Motivation, Social Support, Time Management	Gender and SES moderate the academic benefits of extracurricular activities.	Motivation, self-efficacy, and time management mediate the impact of sports on academic performance.

SES: Socioeconomic Status, Moderators: Variables that influence the strength or direction of the relationship between sports participation and academic performance. Mediators: Variables that explain how or why sports participation affects academic performance.

Table 2 synthesizes findings from various studies investigating factors that moderate or mediate the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance. Rasberry et al. (2011), Carlson et al. (2008), Singh et al. (2012), Eime et al. (2013), and Fredricks & Eccles (2006) examined how gender, socioeconomic status (SES), motivation, social support, and time management influence this relationship. They found that gender moderates the relationship, SES is a significant moderator, motivation and self-efficacy serve as important mediators, social support plays a crucial role, and effective time management and academic balance are important moderators.

Understanding these moderators and mediators provides researchers with valuable insights into the complex interplay between informal sports participation and academic performance. This knowledge can inform the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at supporting student success by optimizing the benefits of sports engagement while addressing potential barriers.

4. Challenges and Conflicting Findings in the Literature

While numerous studies have investigated the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance, there are several challenges and conflicting findings in the literature that warrant consideration. These challenges highlight the complexity of understanding the relationship between sports engagement and academic outcomes and underscore the need for further research to elucidate underlying mechanisms. Table 3 addresses the key challenges and conflicting findings identified in the literature:

Table 3. Challenges and Conflicting Findings in the Literature on the Relationship between Informal Sports Participation and Academic Performance

Reference	Type of Study	Participants & Methods	Research Design	Challenges and Conflicting Findings
Carlson et al. (2008)	Empirical	Elementary school students.	Quantitative, possibly correlational.	Methodological Variability: Studies vary in design, participant characteristics, and measurement methods, making comparisons challenging.
Singh et al. (2012)	Literature Review	Not applicable.	N/A	Selection Bias: Reliance on self-reported measures may introduce biases.
Rasberry et al. (2011)	Literature Review	Not applicable.	N/A	Complexity of Academic Performance: Difficulty in isolating the impact of sports participation amidst various confounding factors.
Fredricks & Eccles (2006)	Empirical	Adolescents.	Longitudinal.	Confounding Variables: Failure to control for variables like prior academic achievement may lead to misinterpretation of findings.
Eime et al. (2013)	Literature Review	Not applicable.	N/A	Mixed Findings: Studies report positive, negative, or no significant relationship between sports participation and academic performance.
Singh et al. (2012)	Literature Review	Not applicable.	N/A	Longitudinal Effects: Limited longitudinal research hinders the ability to establish causality and assess long-term effects.

Table 3 summarises key challenges and conflicting findings identified in studies exploring the connection between informal sports participation and academic performance. Studies by Carlson et al. (2008), Singh et al. (2012), Rasberry et al. (2011), Fredricks & Eccles (2006), and Eime et al. (2013) highlight various complexities. These include methodological variability, such as differences in study design and measurement methods, as noted by Carlson et al. (2008). Singh et al. (2012) discuss the challenge of selection bias arising from reliance on self-reported measures. Additionally, Rasberry et al. (2011) emphasize the complexity of isolating the impact of sports participation amidst confounding factors influencing academic performance. Fredricks & Eccles (2006) underscore the importance of controlling for variables like prior academic achievement to avoid misinterpretation of findings. Furthermore, Eime et al. (2013) highlight the mixed findings in the literature, with studies reporting positive, negative, or no significant relationship between sports participation and academic performance. Lastly, Singh et al. (2012) point out the limited availability of longitudinal research, hindering the ability to establish causality and assess long-term effects. These challenges underscore the need for robust methodologies and comprehensive data collection approaches in studying this intricate relationship.

4.1 The Impact of Informal Sports Participation on Educational Outcomes

Recognizing the complex impact of informal sports participation on educational outcomes, Table 4 explores into the implications for educational policy and practice. This table provides insights from various studies regarding how educational policymakers and practitioners can leverage sports engagement to enhance student well-being and academic achievement.

Table 4. Relationship Between Informal Sports Participation and Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

Reference	Study	Implications for Educational Policy and Practice
Rasberry et al. (2011)	Relationship between physical activity and academic performance	Integration of Physical Activity into the Curriculum: Educational policymakers should recognize the importance of physical activity in promoting overall student well-being and academic achievement. Integrating physical activity opportunities into the curriculum, such as recess breaks, active learning strategies, and extracurricular sports programs, can help students meet recommended activity levels while enhancing their cognitive function and academic performance.
Carlson et al. (2008)	Relationship between physical education and academic achievement	Support for Dual-Career Pathways: Recognizing that many students pursue both academic and athletic goals simultaneously, educational policies should support the development of dual-career pathways that allow students to excel in both domains. Flexibility in scheduling, academic accommodations for athletes, and support services, such as tutoring and academic advising, can help student-athletes balance their academic and sports commitments effectively.
Fredricks & Eccles (2006)	Association between extracurricular participation and academic outcomes	Promotion of Holistic Student Development: Schools should adopt a holistic approach to student development that recognizes the value of extracurricular activities, including sports participation, in fostering social, emotional, and physical well-being. Providing students with opportunities to engage in sports activities can promote positive youth development, resilience, and life skills that extend beyond the classroom.
Eime et al. (2013)	Psychological and social benefits of participation in sports for adults	Equitable Access to Sports Opportunities: Educational institutions should strive to ensure equitable access to sports opportunities for all students, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or ability level. Policies and programs that reduce barriers to sports participation, such as providing transportation, subsidizing fees, and offering adaptive sports programs, can help ensure that all students have the chance to experience the benefits of sports engagement.
Singh et al. (2012)	Relationship between physical activity and academic performance	Teacher Training and Professional Development: Educators play a crucial role in promoting physical activity and sports participation among students. Teacher training and professional development programs should include instruction on the importance of physical activity for academic performance, as well as strategies for integrating movement into the classroom and promoting a positive culture of physical activity within schools.

Table 4 summarizes research on informal sports impact on education policies. Rasberry et al. (2011) propose integrating physical activities for student well-being and academics. Carlson et al. (2008) advocate flexible scheduling for student-athletes. Fredricks & Eccles (2006) support extracurricular activities for holistic student development. Eime et al. (2013) stress equal sports access. Singh et al. (2012) highlight educators' role in promoting physical activity. Implementing these fosters academic and physical well-being. Educational institutions, by recognizing sports' role in student development, can promote holistic success through supportive environments.

5. Future Directions for Research

While existing literature has illuminated aspects of the relationship between informal sports participation and academic performance, several avenues for future research hold promise in enhancing our comprehension of this intricate dynamic. Longitudinal studies are pivotal for providing insights into the enduring impact of sports engagement on academic outcomes over time (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Understanding the underlying mechanisms connecting sports participation to academic performance is essential, with exploration into factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, and social support offering potential elucidation (Carlson et al., 2008). Investigating contextual elements, including school climate and cultural norms, is warranted to comprehend how they interact with sports engagement and academic achievement (Singh et al., 2012). Intervention studies hold value in crafting targeted programs to

promote sports participation and evaluate their influence on academic performance (Rasberry et al., 2011). Integrating technology, such as wearable devices and mobile apps, into research methodologies can furnish real-time data on sports engagement and academic outcomes, augmenting research precision (Eime et al., 2013). Furthermore, exploring the relationship across diverse cultural contexts via global perspectives is indispensable for apprehending cross-cultural variations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). By attending to these future research avenues, scholars can refine our comprehension of the link between informal sports participation and academic performance, thereby informing educational policies and interventions geared toward nurturing holistic student development and achievement.

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