

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Physical Activity Engagement After Completing Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATHFIT) Courses

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined preservice teachers' perceptions of physical activity participation following the completion of Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATHFIT) courses. Twenty purposively selected preservice teachers from a teacher education institution in the Philippines participated in semi-structured virtual interviews. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to examine physical activity practices, perceived exercise intensity, motivation, fitness-related learning, and barriers to participation. Sixteen participants (80%) reported motivational benefits associated with PATHFIT, six (30%) described discontinuing sustained physical activity, and four (20%) perceived minimal or no influence on their physical activity behaviors. These response categories represented different aspects of participants' experiences and may overlap. Participants identified self-discipline, exercise knowledge, and perceived physical capabilities as relevant to their activity engagement. Academic workload, fatigue, competing responsibilities, and limited personal interest emerged as participation barriers. The findings revealed that favorable perceptions of PATHFIT coexisted with varied patterns of continued physical activity. Flexible scheduling, inclusive instructional strategies, and accessible physical activity opportunities are recommended to support sustained participation among preservice teachers.

Keywords: PATHFIT; Preservice Teachers; Physical Activity Participation; Motivation; Barriers; Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Regular physical activity contributes to physical and psychological health, but participation can be difficult to sustain amid academic and personal demands. The World Health Organization (2024) identified physical inactivity as a global public health concern, while Huang et al. (2024) summarized evidence of potential mental-health benefits of physical activity interventions among undergraduate students. For preservice teachers, physical activity may have both personal and professional relevance because they may later be expected to encourage active lifestyles among learners.

In the Philippines, the Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATHFIT) courses form part of tertiary physical education under Commission on Higher Education Memorandum Order No. 39, series of 2021 (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2021). Research on PATHFIT has addressed fitness outcomes, course implementation, and student engagement. Dimarucot et al. (2024) examined changes in selected physical

fitness indicators, Malones (2024) discussed curriculum delivery, and Tagare et al. (2025) reported relationships among motivation, perceived benefits, learning environments, and other dimensions of course engagement. Those findings are important but do not, by themselves, establish whether students continue to be physically active after completing the courses.

Studies of university students also identify conditions that may facilitate or inhibit physical activity. Brown et al. (2024) discussed personal, social, and environmental influences on participation, and Johannes et al. (2024) reviewed approaches intended to increase physical activity among undergraduate students. Tagare et al. (2026) described favorable learning experiences alongside physical demands and instructional challenges in a Philippine PATHFIT context. These studies suggest that students' experiences of a course and their ability to maintain activity outside it should be considered separately.

This study drew on three complementary perspectives as interpretive lenses. Self-Determination Theory highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness in motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; López-García et al., 2023). Meaningful Physical Education emphasizes enjoyment, challenge, social interaction, motor competence, and personal relevance (Beni et al., 2017; Cañabate et al., 2024; Scanlon et al., 2025). The Social-Ecological Model draws attention to personal and contextual conditions that may shape participation (Sallis & Owen, 2015). Together, these theoretical perspectives provided a foundation for understanding participants' motivation, meaningful learning experiences, and the individual and contextual factors influencing their physical activity engagement.

Despite existing studies on PATHFIT implementation, physical fitness outcomes, and student engagement, limited attention has been given to preservice teachers' experiences of maintaining physical activity after completing PATHFIT courses. This study addresses that gap by examining their reported activity practices, perceived motivational benefits, and barriers to continued participation. The study therefore sought to (1) describe participants' self-reported physical activity practices following completion of these courses; (2) examine perceived motivational and fitness-related learning experiences; and (3) identify barriers to continued activity and implications for course delivery. The study emphasized participants' experiences and perspectives to provide context-specific insights into sustained physical activity engagement following PATHFIT completion.

The inquiry is relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) because it considers health-related activity practices and the quality of physical education in teacher preparation (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2026; UNESCO & Loughborough University, 2024). The study does not directly measure progress on these goals; its contribution is to identify context-specific concerns that may inform future initiatives.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative descriptive approach was used to examine preservice teachers' accounts of their experiences of PATHFIT and physical activity following course completion. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Naeem et al., 2023). The qualitative descriptive approach supported an in-depth examination of participants' experiences and the identification of recurring patterns in their accounts.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in a teacher education institution in the Philippines. The setting was relevant because participants were enrolled in teacher preparation programs and had completed PATHFIT 1, 2, and 3.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The study included 20 preservice teachers selected through purposive sampling. Eligibility required enrollment in a teacher education program and completion of PATHFIT 1, 2, and 3; students who had not completed all three courses were excluded. Participants represented different year levels and included both male and female students. Purposive sampling was appropriate to recruit participants with experience relevant to the research questions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

2.4 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore physical activity before and after PATHFIT, perceived learning and motivation, participation barriers, and possible relevance to future teaching. The open-ended questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their personal experiences, perceived learning outcomes, and factors influencing continued physical activity participation.

2.5 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted through videoconferencing. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, were audio-recorded with participant consent, and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The virtual interview format provided participants with opportunities to share their experiences in a familiar and accessible setting, consistent with the practical applications of online qualitative interviewing discussed by Oliffe et al. (2021).

2.6 Data Analysis Techniques

The researcher used inductive coding of interview transcripts, grouped related codes, and refined categories through repeated comparison of participants' responses. The results were reported in four descriptive domains: activity practices, perceived exercise intensity, motivation and fitness-related understanding, and barriers to continued activity. Trustworthiness procedures included participant review of thematic summaries, feedback from faculty specialists in physical education and qualitative research, and documentation of analytic decisions (Motulsky, 2021). Participant response frequencies were used to describe the distribution of identified categories within the sample. Because the categories represented different dimensions of participants' experiences, individual responses could contribute to more than one category.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the host institution's institutional review board before data collection. Participants provided informed consent, were informed that participation was voluntary, and were assigned codes in anonymized transcripts. Interview data were stored securely with access restricted to the researcher.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Reported Activity Practices Following PATHFIT

Participants described different patterns of physical activity after completing PATHFIT 1, 2, and 3. Reported activities included jogging, biking, walking, basketball, volleyball, and swimming. Jogging and biking were each mentioned twice, while walking, basketball, volleyball, and swimming were each mentioned once. These responses illustrated the range of physical activities described by participants following PATHFIT completion. Six participants (30%) reported that they were not sustaining regular physical activity after course completion, frequently referring to academic demands and limited time. One participant described managing to maintain walking and running through self-discipline: "Masasabi ko naman na yes, kaya ko na... walking and running lang... kaya ko naman i-discipline 'yung sarili ko" (R20). Another described academic responsibilities as an obstacle to continuation (R19). These contrasting experiences suggest that continued physical activity engagement was influenced by participants' personal circumstances, motivation, and competing academic responsibilities.

3.2 Perceived Exercise Intensity and Preparedness

Four participants described their activities as moderate in intensity. Two referred to the importance of warm-up routines learned in PATHFIT, while two discussed fatigue or limited energy during more demanding activities. One explained, "Endurance at moderate naman po pala... pero kapag intensive na, my body feels weak, so I rest and then go again" (R6). These descriptions highlighted participants' perceived exercise capacity, physical preparedness, and awareness of their personal limits during physical activity. The findings support consideration of accessible activities and individual differences, consistent with the broader concerns about activity opportunities and physical demands discussed by Johannes et al. (2024) and Tagare et al. (2026).

3.3 Perceived Motivation and Fitness-Related Learning

Sixteen participants (80%) described PATHFIT as motivating them to adopt or consider maintaining physical activity. Participants also reported familiarity with foundational training principles. Participants associated the course with self-discipline, exercise knowledge, and greater confidence. One stated, "I know my body's limits now and I can discipline myself... I can continue walking and running as part of my routine" (R20). Another referred to understanding the reasons for exercise principles (R11). Such accounts are consistent with the importance of perceived competence and personally meaningful experiences discussed in Self-Determination Theory and Meaningful Physical Education (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Beni et al., 2017). These accounts reflected participants' perceived gains in exercise-related understanding, self-regulation, and confidence, which may support their motivation to participate in physical activity.

3.4 Barriers and Limited Perceived Behavioral Influence

Four participants (20%) perceived little or no influence of PATHFIT on their physical activity behavior. Some identified limited personal interest, competing academic priorities, or insufficient time. One commented, "It didn't actually change anything... I'm hard-headed when it comes to doing physical activities because it's not my forte" (R1). Another discussed practice-teaching responsibilities as a barrier to exercise (R19). These accounts indicate that favorable course experiences were not universal and that participation was shaped by constraints outside the course itself. This interpretation is consistent with the multilevel influences on university students' physical activity described by Brown et al. (2024) and with contextual challenges reported by Tagare et al. (2026).

3.5 Synthesis and Implications

Across the interviews, 16 of 20 participants reported motivational benefits, six reported that they were not sustaining regular physical activity, and four perceived little or no behavioral influence. These findings represented distinct but potentially overlapping dimensions of participants' experiences, including motivation, continued participation, and perceived behavioral influence. The evidence suggests a distinction between appreciating or learning from PATHFIT and maintaining a regular activity routine afterward. As a practical implication, programs could explore flexible, low-cost activity options, differentiated levels of physical challenge, and strategies for participating during academically demanding periods. These recommendations align with previous research emphasizing meaningful physical activity experiences, supportive learning environments, and the preparation of future educators to promote active lifestyles (Tagare et al., 2025; McKown et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study was conducted with 20 purposively selected preservice teachers from a single teacher education institution. The findings reflect participants' retrospective accounts of their physical activity experiences following PATHFIT completion. As a qualitative inquiry, the study emphasized contextual understanding and the interpretation of participants' perspectives. Retrospective recall, individual circumstances, and the institutional setting may have influenced the experiences described. The findings provide a foundation for future investigations incorporating broader participant groups, longitudinal designs, and complementary measures of physical activity engagement.

Participants generally described PATHFIT favorably in terms of motivation, perceived exercise knowledge, and self-discipline, but continuation of physical activity differed across individuals. Sixteen participants reported motivational benefits, while six reported no sustained regular activity and four described little or no behavioral influence; these categories may overlap. Academic workload, fatigue, competing responsibilities, and personal interest were identified as barriers. Thus, positive perceptions of PATHFIT did not necessarily correspond to maintained physical activity among the participants. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of meaningful physical education experiences and supportive learning conditions in encouraging continued physical activity among preservice teachers.

For course implementation, institutions and instructors could consider flexible physical activity opportunities, alternatives requiring limited equipment or space, and options with different levels of physical challenge. Instructors could also incorporate practical planning for activity during high-workload periods and reflective discussion of individual barriers. The proposed strategies may be considered for pilot implementation and evaluation to determine their feasibility and potential contribution to sustained physical activity participation. Future research could use longitudinal designs, report elapsed time after course completion, include more diverse settings, and combine interviews with activity logs or validated questionnaires to compare perceived and recorded behavior.

5. Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study followed institutional ethical procedures, including ethics approval before data collection, informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymized participant codes, and restricted access to research records.

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