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An exploration of illness-related barriers to PATH-FIT participation among College Students

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study explored illness-related barriers to participation in the PATH-FIT program among college students in selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in Rizal, Philippines. Rising concerns about physical inactivity and mental health challenges among college students, coupled with a lack of research on illness-related barriers within the Philippine context, prompted this investigation. The study aimed to understand students lived experiences, identifying physical, psychological, and social factors hindering PATH-FIT engagement, and exploring supportive conditions that facilitated participation despite health issues. Fifteen students were purposively selected based on their participation in PATH-FIT and self-reported health concerns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that physical limitations, mental health struggles (anxiety, depression), social anxiety, and academic burnout significantly impacted participation. Students highlighted the need for instructor understanding, flexible policies, and peer support to overcome these barriers. While recognizing PATH-FIT's value, participants emphasized the need for greater program inclusivity and accommodation for diverse health needs. The study recommends curriculum modifications, instructor training on inclusive teaching, enhanced support systems, and policy revisions to create a more equitable and accessible PATH-FIT program. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these recommendations and explore the long-term impact of illness-related barriers.

Keywords: Illness barriers, Inclusive physical activity, PATH-FIT program, Qualitative phenomenology, Student engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Barriers to physical activity among college students are a growing concern worldwide, with significant implications for individual health and societal well-being. Regular physical activity helps reduce the risks associated with sedentary lifestyles—a pattern increasingly prevalent among young adults due to academic pressures and evolving social dynamics (Small et al., 2018). In the Philippines, this issue is further influenced by cultural views on wellness, socioeconomic conditions, and the distinct lifestyles of students balancing academic and personal responsibilities.

Research has identified various obstacles to physical activity among college students, including academic workload, limited facility access, and a lack of social support (Sabharwal & Sabharwal, 2018). For instance, Small et al. (2018) note that off-campus students often face logistical and environmental challenges that discourage active lifestyles. Henshaw and Archibald (2019) emphasize the need for tailored interventions to help students overcome these barriers.

However, fewer studies have explored how illness-related factors—especially mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety—affect participation in physical activity, particularly in the Philippine context. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified mental health challenges, which are now recognized as significant deterrents to physical engagement (Song & Lim, 2022). Song and Lim (2022) suggest a bidirectional relationship: while physical activity can improve mental health, mental well-being also influences motivation and participation levels.

This study investigates the illness-related barriers, particularly psychological and physical health challenges, that affect college students' participation in selected State University and Colleges (SUC) in the Philippines' PATH-FIT program. Specifically, it seeks to (1) identify types of barriers, (2) assess perceived benefits of participation, and (3) offer recommendations to enhance program accessibility. Drawing from personal experience as a college student, there is a noticeable lack of motivation among peers, often linked to anxiety and depression, which in turn hinders active involvement in physical activities.

This research is grounded in the legal framework of Republic Act No. 11036, or the Mental Health Act of 2018, which mandates including mental health services in Philippine educational institutions. This legislation provides a foundation for promoting student wellness through integrated psychological and physical health initiatives (Kim et al., 2021).

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding illness-related barriers to physical activity among Filipino college students, with the broader goal of informing inclusive, health-promoting policies in academic settings.

Statement of the problem

This study explored the lived experiences of college students encountering illness-related barriers to participation in the PATH-FIT program. It investigated the physical, psychological, and social factors hindering full engagement, aiming to identify supportive conditions that facilitated participation despite health challenges. Ultimately, the research sought to understand students’ perceptions of the program's benefits and demands in the context of their health concerns.

1. What are the lived experiences of college students who face illness-related barriers to participating in the PATH-FIT program?

2. What physical, psychological, and social factors contribute to students' limited participation in PATH-FIT activities?

3. What challenges do students with mental or physical health conditions encounter in fulfilling PATH-FIT requirements?

4. What conditions or support systems do students identify as helpful in overcoming illness-related barriers to participation?

5. How do students with health-related concerns perceive the benefits and demands of the PATH-FIT program?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of college students facing illness-related barriers to participation in the PATH-FIT program. Phenomenology was selected to capture the depth and richness of participants' personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions about the phenomenon, providing insight beyond mere statistics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design allows for a nuanced understanding of complex health-related challenges within a physical education context. Research design and instruments are highly applicable to this study as they emphasize understanding participants' subjective realities, especially in dealing with health-related obstacles in physical education. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to explore sensitive issues like mental health and physical illness, while thematic analysis systematically organizes the complex data into coherent findings. This approach offers actionable insights for tailoring the PATH-FIT program to accommodate better students facing illness-related barriers.

Respondents and locale of the study

The respondents were 15 college students enrolled in various programs at selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCS) in the Province of Rizal, Philippines. These students were purposively selected based on their participation in the PATH-FIT program and self-reported experiences with physical or mental health issues that affected their program engagement. The province of Rizal provides a diverse student population and represents the typical socio-cultural environment where the PATH-FIT program is implemented.

Research instrument

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to openly share their experiences and perceptions regarding illness-related barriers to PATH-FIT participation. The interview guide was carefully developed based on the research questions, focusing on participants' physical, psychological, and social challenges and their views on program support systems. This instrument was appropriate because it facilitated rich, detailed narratives while allowing flexibility to probe emergent themes (Patton, 2015).

Data analyses procedure

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures as Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, the researcher engaged in repeated reading to become deeply familiar with the data. Initial codes were generated manually to identify meaningful units related to illness-related barriers. These codes were then grouped into broader themes and subthemes reflecting patterns across the dataset. Constant comparison was employed to refine themes and ensure they accurately represented participant experiences. The analysis process was iterative, allowing for the inclusion of new insights until data saturation was achieved.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What are the lived experiences of college students who face illness-related barriers to participating in the PATH-FIT program?

The lived experiences of students facing illness-related barriers reveal a complex interaction of physical and psychological factors that deter participation. Students with chronic or episodic illnesses described intense physical discomfort, while those with mental health concerns reported emotional exhaustion and anxiety. These narratives reflect how illness—whether visible or invisible—can erode motivation, confidence, and attendance. This aligns with the findings of Tison et al. (2020), who emphasized the compounding effect of mental health struggles on physical inactivity. The study by Song and Lim (2022) further supports that students with mental health issues are less likely to engage in physical activity, underscoring the importance of recognizing such lived experiences in program design.

What physical, psychological, and social factors contribute to students' limited participation in PATH-FIT activities?

These findings highlight the interplay between physical conditions, psychological stressors, and academic fatigue as contributing factors to non-participation. Many respondents noted physical ailments like asthma and chronic fatigue, which act as direct deterrents. Psychological components such as social anxiety further amplify avoidance behavior in physical education settings. According to Henshaw and Archibald (2013), such barriers are especially pronounced when the environment lacks psychological safety. Additionally, Small et al. (2018) emphasize that external academic pressures are a recognized barrier to physical activity, especially in college populations juggling multiple responsibilities.

What challenges do students with mental or physical health conditions encounter in fulfilling PATH-FIT requirements?

Data presents the intervention plan aimed at addressing challenges faced by teachers in enhancing reading comprehension skills through the Catch-up Fridays Program (CFP). Based on the results of the study, the following key areas covered: Absenteeism, Reading Proficiency Students with health conditions face systemic challenges within the PATH-FIT framework, primarily due to its lack of flexibility and inclusive accommodations. These reflections underscore the tension between standardized assessment models and diverse student health profiles. According to the World Health Organization (2020), health-promoting educational systems must adapt to the evolving needs of students. Furthermore, the Mental Health Act of

2018 (Republic Act No. 11036) mandates educational institutions in the Philippines to integrate mental health support and flexibility into academic policies, highlighting the disconnect between legislation and practical implementation.

What conditions or support systems do students identify as helpful in overcoming illness-related barriers to participation?

Students emphasized the critical role of empathy and social support in overcoming illness-related challenges. Instructor flexibility, inclusive teaching approaches, and peer encouragement emerged as key facilitators of participation. These findings echo the work of Kim et al. (2021), who reported that students' health outcomes and engagement levels improve significantly in environments where psychosocial support is embedded. Moreover, peer support aligns with Sabharwal and Sabharwal's (2018) findings that social networks can act as protective buffers against disengagement in physical activity settings.

How do students with health-related concerns perceive the benefits and demands of the PATH-FIT program?

While students recognize the intent and potential benefits of the PATH-FIT program in promoting health, many expressed concerns over its one-size-fits-all design. These reflections point to a gap between program objectives and inclusive execution. Inclusive fitness education must consider the varying capacities and contexts of learners to achieve genuine equity. As emphasized by Gordon et al. (2018), physical education programs should be adapted to individual needs to maximize engagement and positive outcomes. Moreover, inclusive pedagogy is key to ensuring all learners benefit, as supported by Mandigo et al. (2018) in his call for differentiated instruction in fitness programs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to adapt the PATH-FIT program to support better students facing illness-related barriers. Several key changes are recommended to make the program more inclusive and effective. First, the curriculum should be more flexible, allowing personalized activity plans, modified exercises, and alternative ways to track fitness that accommodate varying physical and mental health needs. Instructor training is also essential to help teachers recognize and sensitively respond to students' health concerns, fostering a supportive and understanding environment. Strengthening support systems by linking students to counselling, therapy, and peer networks will provide the necessary resources for their success. Reviewing attendance and grading policies to allow more flexibility can reduce pressure on students with health challenges, ensuring fairer assessments. Finally, further research should explore the long-term effects of these barriers and assess how well these changes improve student participation and well-being. By embracing these adjustments, PATH-FIT can create a welcoming space where all students feel empowered and motivated to engage in physical activity regardless of their health conditions.

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