



## A cross-sectional analysis of women's sports perceptions and athletic engagement

Jay Carlo Bagayas<sup>1,2\*</sup> Leonard John Carrillo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Immaculate Conception — Davao City, Philippines

<sup>2</sup>Mindanao State University — General Santos, Philippines

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Perceptions of women's participation in sport may shape how strongly students engage in athletic activities, yet evidence from Philippine higher education settings remains limited. **Aims:** To examine the association between female students' perceptions of women's sports participation (PWSPI) and overall athletic engagement (AE) and its dimensions in confidence (AEC), dedication (AED), enthusiasm (AEE), and vigor (AEV). **Methods:** A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational survey was administered to N = 293 female students enrolled in PATHFIT service Physical Education courses across multiple Higher Education Institutions in Mindanao, Philippines. Perceptions were assessed using the Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory (PWSPI) and engagement with the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ). Given Likert-type responses and non-normal distributions, Spearman rank-order correlations (two-tailed  $\alpha = .05$ ) with 95% bootstrap confidence intervals were used to quantify associations. **Result:** PWSPI was positively and significantly associated with overall athletic engagement ( $\rho = .169$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI [.055, .278]). At the subscale level, dedication (AED), enthusiasm (AEE), and vigor (AEV) each showed small, significant positive associations with PWSPI, whereas confidence (AEC) did not reach statistical significance. **Conclusion:** Perceptions of women's sports participation are associated with modestly higher athletic engagement, particularly in motivational and energetic facets (dedication, enthusiasm, vigor). Cultivating gender-affirming climates while embedding targeted efficacy-building strategies (e.g., mastery experiences and feedback) may help translate supportive perceptions into stronger confidence and sustained participation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in sport has expanded globally, yet inequalities in access, support, and representation persist across educational and community settings. International syntheses note that, despite symbolic milestones such as gender parity targets at recent Olympics, girls and women continue to face structural and psychosocial barriers, including safety concerns, dropout during adolescence, limited leadership pathways, and uneven resource allocation that constrain everyday participation and advancement in sport (Jeanes et al., 2020; Meier et al., 2021). These patterns are also visible in Southeast Asia and the Philippines, where national narratives of women's sporting success coexist with shortfalls in opportunities, coaching representation, and program continuity for women and girls (Moreno-Llamas et al., 2021). Within Philippine higher education, particularly across

Mindanao, where service Physical Education courses such as PATHFIT function as a shared curricular experience, female students' everyday encounters with sport are shaped by prevailing socio-cultural norms and gendered expectations surrounding women in athletics (Xie et al., 2023; Farzaneh et al., 2021). These contextual influences may, in turn, affect the extent to which they engage meaningfully in campus athletic activities. Understanding how students' perceptions of women's sports participation relate to their athletic engagement is therefore crucial for informing instructional, co-curricular, and policy interventions designed to strengthen participation, motivation, and overall well-being among young women across Mindanao HEIs. This need is further underscored by evidence that many Philippine PE environments continue to grapple with persistent limitations in equipment and facilities, which shape students' learning experiences and opportunities for engagement (Bagayas et al., 2026; Bracamonte et al., 2025). Studies on athlete engagement conceptualize it as a multidimensional, positive sport experience encompassing confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor, and it is commonly assessed with the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ) (Jiang et al., 2023). The AEQ's four-factor structure and a higher-order global engagement factor have been supported across samples and languages, with acceptable reliability and expected nomological links—such as inverse associations with burnout and positive links with motivation and enjoyment (De Francisco et al., 2026; Lonsdale et al., 2007). Building on this evidence base, contemporary research further reinforces the AEQ's structural stability and theoretical coherence across diverse athletic populations, with recent validation studies confirming its factor structure and utility for assessing positive sport experiences (Raimundi et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Validation studies among youth, collegiate, and competitive athletes consistently demonstrate that the AEQ's multidimensional model holds across gender, age groups, and competitive levels, with strong internal consistency and robust measurement invariance supporting its applicability across diverse sport contexts (Jiang et al., 2023). Large-scale analyses also confirm that athlete engagement is meaningfully intertwined with motivational quality, enjoyment, and psychological well-being, showing that engaged athletes report more positive sport experiences and lower emotional exhaustion than their less-engaged peers (Raimundi et al., 2024). Comprehensive evidence indicates that burnout, motivation, perfectionism, and the coach-athlete relationship are the most influential psychological correlates of engagement, underscoring the AEQ's utility as both a diagnostic and developmental tool in contemporary sport psychology (Jiahao & Jing, 2024; Fu et al., 2025). Parallel literatures on women in sport consistently highlight entrenched socio-cultural and institutional barriers, including gender stereotyping, inadequate or inaccessible facilities, unequal resource distribution, and limited representation of women in coaching and leadership roles (Işıkgöz et al., 2025; Serpell et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2023). Such barriers persist even in contexts where women's participation is celebrated, suggesting a disconnect between national gender-equality discourses and everyday sporting realities. Reviews indicate that factors such as gendered expectations, lack of female role models, and diminished visibility of women's sport in institutional settings systematically influence women's participation and retention in sport (Thompson-Radford & Skey, 2025; Kelly et al., 2024). In Mindanao, universities further show that female athletes continue to face psychological and structural constraints, such as resource shortages and inequitable sport programming, despite demonstrated resilience and strong interest in participation (Xie et al., 2023; Tagare et al., 2025).

Although gender equity in sport has gained momentum, research in Philippine higher education has not yet directly examined how female students' perceptions of women's participation in sport shape their athletic engagement. Existing studies document barriers, motivational factors, and PE-related engagement (Campoamor-Olegario et al., 2025), yet they do not test whether perceptions of women's sports participation co-vary with multidimensional athlete engagement, particularly in required PE courses such as PATHFIT that reach all students across Mindanao HEIs. Likewise, despite policy guidance encouraging culturally responsive strategies to support women in sport, quantitative student-level analyses within university settings remain limited, leaving a critical gap in understanding how perceptions translate into actual behavioral engagement in athletic contexts. Understanding the subjective processes through which female students interpret women's participation in sport is essential, as perceptions shape motivation, confidence, and willingness to participate (Senne, 2018). While institutional interventions often focus on facilities, access, or program offerings, these efforts may fall short if they do not address how students make sense of gendered sport environments (Espada et al., 2023; Cruz et al., 2022). By analyzing how perceptions of women's sports

participation relate to the four dimensions of athlete engagement, this study provides evidence to support more targeted, student-centered strategies for PATHFIT and campus programming across Mindanao HEIs.

These gaps point to the need for an integrated quantitative examination that links perception to engagement, a relationship implied in the literature but not empirically tested in the Mindanao higher-education context. To our knowledge, no quantitative study has directly examined how perceptions of women's participation in sport relate to multidimensional athletic engagement among university students in Mindanao, thereby marking the novelty of the present work. The study's primary purpose is to examine the extent to which female PATHFIT students' scores on the Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory (PWSPI) are associated with athletic engagement measured by the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ), both at the overall level and across its four subscales (confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, vigor).

### METHOD

The study employed a cross-sectional correlational survey design to examine the associations between female students' perceptions of women's sports participation and their athletic engagement (overall and across confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor). The design is appropriate for quantifying the strength and direction of relationships among variables measured once and without experimental manipulation.

The study gathered  $N = 293$  female students enrolled in PATHFIT courses across four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Mindanao, Philippines. Participants were invited through instructor-coordinated announcements during scheduled PATHFIT sessions, and participation was voluntary with informed consent obtained before data collection.

Population and the methods of sampling, Instrumentation (sample of questions, scoring method, and psychometric properties (validity and reliability):

Purposive sampling was used to recruit female PATHFIT students who met predefined study criteria, including enrollment in HEIs with active sports programs. These criteria were selected to ensure participants possessed experiences aligned with the study's focus on women's sports participation and athletic engagement. To ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability of data collection across multiple sites, a standardized procedure was implemented in all participating state universities in Mindanao. Grit and athlete engagement were assessed using two validated instruments: the Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory (PWSPI) developed by Aman (2024), and the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ) by Jiang et al. (2023). The Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ) demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with high internal consistency across its four subscales ( $CR = .887-.905$ ) and solid convergent validity supported by factor loadings ranging from .758 to .885, and the Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory (PWSPI) demonstrated reliability of 0.703.

Instrument:

Perceptions of women's participation in sport were assessed using the Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory, a 15-item Likert-type instrument in which higher scores reflect more favorable perceptions of women's sports participation (PWSPI; Aman, 2020). Athletic engagement was measured using the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ; Jiang et al., 2023), which comprised 16 items distributed across 4 factors. Capturing overall engagement (AE) and four subscales: confidence (AEC), dedication (AED), enthusiasm (AEE), and vigor (AEV). Scale and subscale scores were computed according to instrument guidelines.

Procedures and, if relevant, the time frame:

Data collection was conducted during scheduled PATHFIT sessions across the four HEIs, using either paper-based questionnaires or a secure online survey platform, depending on institutional logistics. Before participation, students received a brief overview of study aims, assurances of confidentiality, and instructions emphasizing voluntariness and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The survey required approximately 10–15 minutes to complete and included sociodemographic questions followed by the PWSPI and AEQ. Completed responses were

coded and stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team. Data were screened for completeness, outliers, and inconsistent patterns; analyses proceeded using complete cases.

#### Data Analysis :

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' sociodemographic characteristics and scale scores for the Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory (PWSPI) and the Athlete Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ: overall engagement and confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor subscales). Given the Likert-type format of the instruments and observed non-normality, Spearman rank-order correlations ( $\rho$ ) were used to examine associations between PWSPI and athletic engagement outcomes (overall AE, AEC, AED, AEE, AEV). All tests were two-tailed with  $\alpha = .05$ , and 95% confidence intervals for  $\rho$  were generated through bootstrap resampling (1,000 iterations). Effect sizes were interpreted according to conventional thresholds for rank correlations (small  $\approx .10$ –.29; moderate  $\approx .30$ –.49; large  $\geq .50$ ).

Common method bias was evaluated using Harman's single-factor test, which indicated that no single factor accounted for more than 5% of the variance, suggesting that common method bias was not a concern. A separate regression model was conducted to assess whether age, income, and sport type functioned as control variables influencing overall athletic engagement. Construct validity was also examined in the present sample. The CFA demonstrated excellent convergent validity, with very high standardized loadings for AEQ items ( $\approx .92$ –.99) and strong loadings for most PWSPI items ( $\approx .74$ –.89), alongside high internal consistency across all scales (PWSPI  $\alpha = .907$ ,  $\omega = .960$ ; AEQ subscales  $\alpha = .956$ –.985; AEQ total  $\alpha = .943$ ,  $\omega = .986$ ). Discriminant validity was supported as PWSPI showed only weak latent correlations with the AEQ facets (.08–.13), while AEQ dimensions were strongly interrelated (.84–.92), confirming that the measures functioned appropriately and distinctly within the sample.

#### Ethical Considerations:

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary and based on informed consent after a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, minimal risks, and benefits. To reduce any risk of perceived coercion from classroom recruitment, participation was independent of course requirements; instructors did not access individual responses, and there were no grade-related incentives or penalties. Respondents were advised that they could skip any item or withdraw at any time without consequence. Only minimal, non-identifiable sociodemographic information was collected; survey data were de-identified using study codes, stored securely on encrypted, access-restricted drives, and reported in aggregate to prevent identification of individuals or institutions. The study posed minimal risk, limited to potential discomfort when reflecting on gender norms; support contacts were provided for participants who wished to discuss concerns. Data were processed in accordance with the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (e.g., Belmont Report) and aligned with privacy safeguards under the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173), including purpose limitation, data minimization, security measures, and participant rights; data will be retained only for as long as necessary for scholarly reporting and then securely destroyed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

This section presents the findings according to the study's research questions. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' sociodemographic characteristics and scale scores (Perception of Women's Sports Participation Inventory, PWSPI; Athlete Engagement Questionnaire, AEQ overall engagement and subscales: confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, vigor). Given the Likert-type nature of the instruments and non-normal distributions, Spearman rank-order correlations ( $\rho$ ) were used to examine bivariate associations between PWSPI and athletic engagement outcomes (overall AE and AEC, AED, AEE, AEV) using JASP.

**Table 1.** Respondents' sociodemographic profile

Variables		N(%)	M ± SD
<b>Type of Sports Participation</b>	Team Sports	192(65.53%)	
	Individual and Dual Sports	101(34.47%)	
			19.80 ± 2.69
<b>Age</b>			
<b>Family Income</b>	Lower Middle Class	268(91.47%)	
	Middle Class	18(6.14%)	
	Upper Middle Income	5(1.71%)	
	High-Income	1(0.34%)	
	Rich	1(0.34%)	

Table 1 shows that the sociodemographic profile of the respondents was predominantly engaged in team sports (65.53%) rather than individual or dual sports (34.47%), and the cohort's mean age of 19.80 years (SD = 2.69) situates them in late adolescence/early adulthood, when institutional structures and peer affiliation are especially salient. The income distribution was highly concentrated in the lower middle class (91.47%), with minimal representation from middle (6.14%), upper middle (1.71%), high-income (0.34%), and rich (0.34%) categories. This homogeneity suggests that observed engagement patterns are likely embedded within school or university settings where costs for facilities, equipment, and coaching are partially offset. Team sports' dominance may reflect the visibility, coordinated scheduling, and social cohesion typical of institutional programming. In contrast, lower participation in individual/dual sports may be linked to barriers such as specialized equipment requirements and venue access that are less easily absorbed by institutional subsidies.

**Table 2.** Correlations between Perceptions of Women's Sports Participation and Athletic Engagement

Pair	$\rho$	<i>p</i>	95% CI
PWSPI- AE (Overall)	.169**	.004	[.055, .278]
PWSPI - AEC (Confidence)	.114	.052	[-.001, .225]
PWSPI - AED (Dedication)	.125*	.033	[.010, .236]
PWSPI - AEE (Enthusiasm)	.173**	.003	[.060, .282]
PWSPI - AEV (Vigor)	.159**	.006	[.045, .269]

The associations between PWSPI and athletic engagement outcomes from the overall athletic engagement (AE) and its subscales (AEC, AED, AEE, AEV) as shown in Table 2, revealed that perceptions of women's sports participation (PWSPI) are associated with overall athletic engagement (AE) and with specific engagement dimensions; confidence (AEC), dedication (AED), enthusiasm (AEE), and vigor (AEV) using Spearman rank-order correlations (N = 293). PWSPI was positively and significantly associated with overall athletic engagement,  $\rho = .169$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI [.055, .278], indicating that more favorable perceptions of women's participation in sport align with slightly elevated overall engagement. At the dimensional level, significant positive associations emerged for dedication (AED;  $\rho = .125$ ,  $p = .033$ , 95% CI [.010, .236]), enthusiasm (AEE;  $\rho = .173$ ,  $p = .003$ , 95% CI [.060, .282]), and vigor (AEV;  $\rho = .159$ ,  $p = .006$ , 95% CI [.045, .269]). In contrast, the association between PWSPI and confidence (AEC) did not reach conventional significance ( $\rho = .114$ ,  $p = .052$ , 95% CI [-.001, .225]). Collectively, these results suggest that favorable perceptions of women's sports participation co-occur with modest increases in motivational and energetic facets of engagement. In contrast, the relationship with self-belief appears weaker and is not statistically supported at the .05 level.

**Table 3.** Control Variables as Predictors of Athletic Engagement

Variables	b	SE	$\beta$	95% CI	p
(Intercept)	3.36	0.24	—	[2.89, 3.84]	< .001
Age	0.07	0.11	.04	[-0.16, 0.29]	.548
Income	-0.09	0.14	-.04	[-0.36, 0.18]	.525
Sport Type	0.06	0.13	.03	[-0.20, 0.31]	.651

$R=.055, R^2=.003, R^2_{adj}=-.007; F(3,289)=0.287, p=.835; F(3,289)=0.287, p=.835.$

Table 3 indicates that the control variables, age, income, and sport type, were not significant predictors of overall athletic engagement, and the model explained only a negligible proportion of variance in the Athlete Engagement. These findings suggest that demographic and participation-related factors alone do not meaningfully shape women students' overall engagement levels. This pattern suggests that engagement may be driven more by psychological or environmental influences not captured by the current controls, aligning with the literature showing that demographic predictors often have weak associations with motivational or engagement outcomes.

**Discussion**

The observed correlations, clustered in the small range ( $\rho \approx .12-.17$ ), are statistically reliable for overall AE, AED, AEE, and AEV. They provide converging evidence that perceptual climates supportive of women's sport are linked to how invested, excited, and energetic students feel about their athletic activities (Abralde et al., 2022; Mossman et al., 2024). The non-significant association with confidence, despite a similar direction of effect, suggests a plausible distinction between the antecedents of efficacy-related beliefs and those of motivational and activation states. Confidence may require more proximal mechanisms, such as skill-acquisition opportunities, mastery experiences, and individualized feedback, beyond favorable perceptions alone (Doorley et al., 2021). Whereas dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor might be more sensitive to broader attitudinal and social-normative supports captured by PWSPi.

Additionally, the control-variable analysis showed that age, income, and sport type did not meaningfully account for differences in women students' athletic engagement. This further reinforces that engagement in this context is shaped more by perceptual and motivational factors than by demographic characteristics. These contextual features have direct programmatic implications. First, given the positive associations between PWSPi and dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor, institutions should capitalize on perception-shaping levers, such as inclusive messaging, visible female role models in campus sport, and gender-equitable policies, to cultivate climates that affirm women's participation. Second, the non-significant link with confidence underscores the need for targeted efficacy-building strategies embedded within programming: progressive skill clinics, scaffolded mastery tasks, peer mentoring, and strengths-based feedback that can translate favorable perceptions into tangible improvements in self-belief. Third, to address barriers in individual/dual sport uptake, institutions should expand low-cost, equipment-light offerings and maintain shared equipment pools, flexible venue access, and drop-in formats that fit variable student schedules. These steps are particularly salient in lower-middle-income cohorts, where even modest costs or logistical constraints can be prohibitive (Griffiths et al., 2022). In general, favorable perceptions of women's sports participation are associated with slightly higher overall athletic engagement and consistent positive associations with dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor, but not with confidence at the .05 level. This pattern argues for dual-pronged strategies: shaping inclusive perceptual climates to bolster motivation and energy, while deploying targeted mastery and feedback mechanisms to build confidence. Within predominantly lower-middle-income, team sport-oriented cohorts, expanding accessible individual/dual options, maintaining equipment pools and fee waivers, and offering flexible formats can help reduce participation barriers (Zhang et al., 2024). Strengthening the evidence base through equity-focused analyses will support targeted resource allocation and more inclusive sport pathways for female students.

*Research Contribution*

This study enhances understanding of how perceptual climates that support women's sports participation influence student athletes' motivational experiences. It demonstrates that inclusive and affirming sport environments are associated with higher levels of dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor, but do not substantially elevate confidence. By distinguishing between activation-based engagement and efficacy-related beliefs, the study provides conceptual clarity on the mechanisms that influence these outcomes. It also contributes to equity-driven sport research by highlighting how climate-level influences and resource-related conditions shape participation patterns for female students, particularly in contexts where socioeconomic constraints and sport-type preferences are prominent.

*Limitations*

Although the findings offer meaningful insights, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences about the relationships between perceptual climates and athletic engagement outcomes. The reliance on self-report instruments may introduce bias, including overly positive or socially desirable responses. In this study, purposive sampling was used; the sample may not fully represent the wider population of university women, introducing potential sampling bias and further limiting generalizability. The sample predominantly comprises lower-middle-income students with strong team-sport orientations, which limits the generalizability of the results to more diverse populations. Additionally, several potentially influential factors, such as prior athletic experience, coaching behaviors, and peer influences, were not measured and may have shaped the observed patterns, suggesting that the model does not fully capture the complexity of confidence development and motivational engagement. Finally, the study did not include a multivariate regression model directly examining the combined effects of PWSPI and the AEQ dimensions, which limits the ability to determine their unique predictive contributions when modeled simultaneously.

*Suggestions*

Future research should explore longitudinal and intervention-based approaches to determine how changes in perceptual climates influence motivation and confidence over time. Investigations involving structured skill development, supportive coaching strategies, and mastery-oriented learning experiences would help clarify the processes that strengthen confidence alongside positive perceptions. Expanding research to encompass a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds, gender identities, and sports would enhance understanding of how contextual differences shape participation. Additional work is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional strategies that increase accessibility, including equipment-sharing systems, low-cost program options, and flexible participation formats, to ensure that female students facing financial or logistical barriers can fully engage in athletic opportunities.

**CONCLUSION**

This study shows that more favorable perceptions of women's sports participation are modestly but reliably associated with higher overall athletic engagement among female students, with significant links to dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor, and a non-significant relationship with confidence. Situated within a late-adolescent, lower-middle-income, team sport-oriented cohort, the findings underscore the interplay of institutional climates and program design in shaping engagement, suggesting dual-pronged strategies that (a) cultivate inclusive, gender-affirming perceptual environments to bolster motivation and energy and (b) embed targeted mastery, feedback, and mentoring to develop confidence. Expanding accessible individual- and dual-sport event options, sustaining equipment pools and fee waivers, and offering flexible, drop-in formats can help mitigate participation barriers in resource-constrained contexts.

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### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

JB contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, resources, data curation, writing original draft, writing review, and editing. LC contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, writing original draft, writing review and editing, visualization, and supervision.

### AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

To improve the grammar of this article, Microsoft 365 Copilot Chat was utilized. Flash was used to aid the reference search process under the authors' direct supervision. All contributions from these AI models were rigorously reviewed and meticulously edited by the authors to ensure adherence to scholarly standards.

### CONFLICTS OF INTERES

The authors declare that they do not have any conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article, whether financial, institutional, or personal, that could influence the research process, analysis, writing, or publication of this manuscript.

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