

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PRACTICES AMONG BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS AT UNIOESTE (FRANCISCO BELTRÃO CAMPUS) AND THEIR PARTICULARITIES THROUGHOUT THE DEGREE PROGRAMME

ISABELA RODRIGUES BORGES

GABRIEL HENRIQUE PIMENTA ISBOLI
UNIVERSIDADE ESTADUAL DO CENTRO OESTE (UNICENTRO)

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the configuration and transformation of physical activity (PA) practices among undergraduate Business Administration students at UNIOESTE, Francisco Beltrão campus, through the lens of Shove, Pantzar, and Watson's (2012) practice theory. Employing a qualitative and descriptive approach, we conducted sixteen semi-structured interviews and applied content analysis to the resulting data. The findings indicate that, although students recognise the benefits of PA for physical and mental health as well as academic performance, the frequency of practice tends to decline significantly over the course of the degree. This reduction is interpreted not merely as a matter of time scarcity, but as a reconfiguration of the students' "dominant projects" in academic and professional life, in which study and work demands assume both temporal and symbolic precedence. Consequently, the meaning of PA often shifts, becoming a functional tool for stress management and academic enhancement. Identified barriers—including material constraints (such as time, financial resources, and inadequate infrastructure), challenges to competence (e.g., due to injury), and social pressures—result in the discontinuation or strategic reconfiguration of practices, frequently involving a transition from collective to individual activities. The study highlights how the "life of elements" (materials, competences, and meanings) is constantly tested and renegotiated, shaping the trajectories of PA practices within the university context. It offers critical insights for the development of institutional policies and programmes that not only encourage PA but also engage with the complex dynamics through which practices and their constituent elements compete for space and meaning in students' everyday lives, aiming at the effective promotion of well-being and quality of life.

Keywords: Physical activity; University students; Practice theory.

1 INTRODUCTION

The regular practice of physical activity is widely recognised as a fundamental element in the promotion of health, well-being, and quality of life (Sousa et al., 2021; WHO, 2020). Within the university context, such practice acquires even greater relevance, as students often face routines marked by academic overload, stress, and intense emotional demands. Under these conditions, physical exercise can serve as a strategy for maintaining physical and mental balance, with positive impacts even on academic performance (Sousa et al., 2021; WHO, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite the acknowledged benefits, university students do not always manage to maintain a regular routine of physical activity. The literature indicates that factors such as lack of time, pressure for academic results, and the absence of institutional policies geared towards health promotion hinder adherence to regular exercise practices (Gomes Filho, 2024; Figueiredo et al., 2009; Salve, 2008). Throughout the undergraduate years, these barriers tend to intensify, contributing to a gradual decline in physical activity engagement (Mielke et al., 2010).

The university environment itself exerts a direct influence on students' habits. Available infrastructure, social support, and institutional encouragement may either foster or discourage engagement in healthy practices (Ferreira, Brito, & Santos, 2018; Figueiredo et al., 2009). A recent study conducted at the Federal University of Paraná found that approximately 60% of students engage in some form of regular physical

activity, with positive effects on both their physical and mental health (Silva & Costa, 2023). However, such realities may vary depending on the institution, academic programme, and regional context, thereby underscoring the importance of specific investigations.

Engagement in physical activity is strongly associated with improved quality of life, encompassing both physical and psychological benefits (Silva & Costa, 2023). Within higher education, undergraduate students frequently face an intense academic workload, which can compromise their ability to maintain a regular exercise routine (Mielke et al., 2010). State University of Western Paraná (UNIOESTE), a public higher education institution, offers several undergraduate programmes, among which the Business Administration course stands out. Its students are equally subject to these academic demands.

Understanding how Business Administration students at UNIOESTE – Francisco Beltrão campus – engage with physical activity throughout their degree programme is essential for identifying behavioural patterns and proposing interventions aimed at enhancing the academic community's quality of life. The core research problem of this study, therefore, lies in examining how these students incorporate physical activity into their daily routines, with the aim of understanding the frequency of such practices and identifying the most common types of physical activity among them.

These issues are relevant to understanding students' behaviours and the ways in which their choices affect their health throughout their academic trajectory. Salve (2008) highlights that academic workload, lack of time, and the prioritisation of other activities are among the main obstacles to regular physical activity among students at UNICAMP. According to the same author, although many students acknowledge the benefits associated with physical activity, a significant portion encounters difficulties in integrating such practices consistently into their everyday lives.

As students progress through their undergraduate studies, their priorities tend to shift, affecting both the frequency and types of physical activity they engage in. Salve (2008) also notes that while some students maintain a regular exercise routine, the increasing demands of coursework, internships, and part-time jobs may lead to a decline in physical activity. Although the importance of physical activity is widely recognised, engagement in such practices varies significantly across students, degree programmes, and institutions (Haase et al., 2004; Silva, 2011).

Given this context, the aim of this research is to understand how physical activity practices are configured among Business Administration students at the State University of Western Paraná (UNIOESTE) – Francisco Beltrão campus. Specifically, it seeks to identify the frequency and types of activities undertaken, as well as possible changes in these habits throughout the course of their academic journey. The central research question is: **how are physical activity practices manifested among Business Administration students at UNIOESTE – Francisco Beltrão campus – and what is the perceived impact of these practices on their well-being?**

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform health promotion and quality of life initiatives within university contexts, particularly within applied social sciences programmes such as Business Administration. Beyond addressing an academic gap, the study also aims to contribute to the development of policies and programmes that encourage healthier practices in university environments, promoting

the physical and emotional well-being of students (Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2017; Schultz & McCarthy, 2013).

The choice of topic is justified not only by its academic relevance but also by one of the author's personal motivations. Having experienced the challenges imposed by university life, the author recognised the importance of self-care, mindfulness, and physical activity as key elements in maintaining mental health. Drawing on similar experiences in other institutions, such as the physical activity programmes at USP (Silva & Nunes, 2019), it is hoped that the findings of this study may inspire the adoption of similar initiatives at the Francisco Beltrão campus, as well as foster institutional partnerships aimed at promoting student health at UNIOESTE.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Understanding physical activity practices within the university context requires an approach that considers multiple dimensions – from fundamental definitions of physical activity to the institutional dynamics that either promote or hinder its adoption. This theoretical framework is organised into four main sections: the concept of physical activity and its relationship with quality of life; challenges and consumption patterns of physical activity in academic environments; barriers and facilitators faced by university students; and, finally, an interpretative analysis grounded in practice theory, drawing on the contributions of Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012).

2.1 Physical activity and quality of life

Physical activity (PA) is widely acknowledged for its role in promoting health and preventing chronic illnesses such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and depression (Polisseni & Ribeiro, 2014; Stubbs et al., 2017). Beyond its physical benefits, PA is also linked to improved mood, self-esteem, and sleep quality, and is considered an essential component of both physical and mental well-being (Paffenbarger & Lee, 1996).

According to Freire et al. (2014), PA is defined as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure above resting levels. Nasser et al. (2016) classify PA into four domains: work, domestic activities, transportation, and leisure – the latter being particularly relevant, as it tends to remain more stable throughout adult life.

However, physical activity patterns are strongly influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors. Haase et al. (2004) identified significant differences in activity levels between developed and developing countries. In Brazil, the culture surrounding exercise has evolved in recent decades, with the rise of fitness movements and the popularisation of weight training, aerobics, and alternative modalities such as Pilates and yoga (Modeneze & Vilarta, 2005).

Considering the academic environment and the interplay between institutional space and work-related activities, Fernandes (1996) argues that physical and psychological factors affect quality of life in the workplace. Depending on how these factors are managed, they may contribute to improved performance and productivity. Regular PA is also associated with a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression, better sleep quality, and enhanced overall well-being. Individuals who engage in such

practices are more likely to report high life satisfaction and fewer mental health issues (Paffenbarger & Lee, 1996).

Given the importance of PA in promoting health and quality of life, it is essential to examine how the academic context may influence the uptake and benefits of physical activity practices among university students.

2.2 The academic context and physical activity consumption

The global decline in physical activity levels has become an increasingly pressing concern. Studies have shown a marked rise in sedentary behaviour in recent years (Turi et al., 2017). According to the Organização Pan-Americana da Saúde (OPAS, 2024), around 1.8 billion adults (31%) failed to meet recommended PA levels in 2022. If effective interventions are not implemented, this figure may increase to 35% by 2030. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity PA or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity PA for adults (OPAS, 2024).

This situation is mirrored in universities. Haase et al. (2004) reported low levels of adequate PA among students across various institutions. A study conducted in Colombia found that over 40% of university students did not engage in physical activity on a regular basis (Verela et al., 2011). Similarly, Figueiredo et al. (2009), studying medical students in Minas Gerais, observed a sharp decline in time dedicated to PA throughout the degree, particularly in the later years when academic demands intensify.

University life is often marked by stressful circumstances, including heavy study loads, tight deadlines, and anxieties regarding future employment (Tyrer, 2012). Such pressures can compromise healthy habits. Moreover, engagement in physical activity varies between degree programmes, being more common among Physical Education students (Mielke et al., 2010; Salve, 2008). This discrepancy may be attributed to curricular structure and the greater emphasis placed on health in such programmes (Silva, 2011).

Given the importance of PA for both physical and mental health, and the lack of research focusing on students in applied social sciences such as Business Administration, this study aims to explore physical activity consumption patterns among undergraduates at the State University of Western Paraná (UNIOESTE), Francisco Beltrão campus, contributing to a better understanding of this research gap.

2.2.1 Barriers and facilitators of physical activity

The academic setting presents various barriers that hinder students' adherence to regular physical activity. The intense study routine, combined with stress and a lack of motivation, is among the primary obstacles to maintaining healthy habits (Gomes Filho, 2024). Additionally, financial constraints and the absence of accessible spaces for physical activity are frequently cited as significant impediments (Casas et al., 2018).

Conversely, support from family, friends, and peers, as well as the availability of appropriate infrastructure, serve as important facilitators. On-campus gyms or partnerships with external institutions can significantly increase PA participation

(Sousa et al., 2021). The creation of support networks and welcoming environments fosters engagement, promoting a more active culture among students.

Pedroso et al. (2019) further emphasise that university sports programmes – including internal competitions and organised groups for team sports – can enhance social interaction and encourage student involvement in physical activity. Whether formal or informal, such initiatives contribute to the development of healthier routines and greater adherence to exercise.

Thus, barriers and facilitators are closely linked to the social and structural conditions provided by universities, shaping the effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting physical activity. This relationship is explored in greater depth in the following section on institutional policies and programmes.

2.2.2 Institutional policies and programmes promoting physical activity

As institutions hosting a large population of young adults, universities play a strategic role in fostering healthy habits. As noted by Cezar et al. (2014), such settings present a unique opportunity to implement programmes promoting PA, thereby positively influencing students' health and quality of life.

Reis et al. (2016) assert that these programmes are effective in combating sedentary behaviour and promoting physical and mental well-being. An example is the “Esporte Universitário” programme at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), which offers sporting activities and events designed for leisure and community engagement (Almeida, 2018). Ferreira, Brito, and Santos (2018) demonstrate that group PA improves students' physical stamina and mental health.

Another notable initiative is the “Segundo Tempo Universitário” programme at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), which enabled remote physical activities such as yoga and functional training during the pandemic (Amin, 2020). Remote delivery allowed students to maintain their connection with exercise even during social distancing.

At the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), a study by Romero et al. (2017) revealed that the main motivators for student participation in physical activity were enjoyment and health benefits. Understanding these motivations enables the development of more tailored and effective programmes.

Despite these positive examples, implementing such policies remains challenging. According to a national report by the Ministry of Health (Brazil, 2013), budgetary and infrastructural limitations hinder the expansion of extracurricular health-focused programmes. Moreover, Silva (2022) argues that rigid academic timetables reduce student adherence to such initiatives, calling for more flexible scheduling and free access to activities.

In sum, institutional policies and programmes aimed at promoting PA are vital tools for advancing student well-being. However, their effectiveness depends on institutional capacity to overcome financial and logistical barriers, and to integrate these initiatives into students' daily routines, thereby fostering a culture of self-care and valuing physical and mental health.

2.3 Practice theory and physical activity consumption in the university environment

Practice theory offers a valuable theoretical lens through which to understand how behaviours such as physical activity are maintained, modified, or abandoned over time. According to Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012), social practices comprise three interdependent elements: materials (objects, technologies, infrastructure), competences (skills and knowledge), and meanings (symbolic, cultural, and social values associated with practices).

In the university context, the interplay of these elements directly influences students' habits and lifestyles, shaping their academic, social, and personal routines. Factors such as course workload, academic complexity, and institutional culture play a key role in configuring students' daily practices. A study by Guedes, Legnani, and Legnani (2012) showed that motivations for physical activity among university students vary according to gender, age, and socioeconomic background, illustrating how cultural and material dimensions affect these behaviours.

The introduction of programmes promoting physical activity, along with the provision of appropriate infrastructure, can have a positive impact on the adoption of new habits – particularly in environments conducive to such practices (Souza & Duarte, 2014). Conversely, institutions that fail to support or facilitate access to physical activities tend to reinforce sedentary behaviours and hinder the development of a health-oriented institutional culture.

Accordingly, physical activity practices vary across institutions depending on organisational cultures, available resources, and prevailing student preferences. Oliveira (2019) notes that some universities prioritise team sports, while others exhibit greater engagement with individual or less conventional activities. These differences highlight the significance of institutional and cultural contexts in shaping student practices.

In addition, external factors such as public safety may also influence physical activity habits. A study conducted at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul found that in areas with high levels of violence, students expressed concern about safety when engaging in outdoor exercise (Gomes Filho, 2024). The research also indicated that lack of time and fatigue resulting from academic demands were among the most frequently cited barriers to regular physical activity.

Therefore, analysing physical activity practices within universities requires consideration of multiple dimensions: from course-specific characteristics and institutional opportunities for access, to the cultural and social factors that shape student behaviour. In the specific case of Business Administration students at UNIOESTE – Francisco Beltrão campus – understanding these dynamics can inform the development of more effective strategies for promoting health and well-being in the academic setting, by strengthening a culture of physical activity.

3 METHODS

The methodology adopted in this research is structured around a set of systematic procedures aimed at ensuring the legitimacy of the knowledge produced (Gerhardt & Silveira, 2009). This section presents the methodological approach of the study, the type of research undertaken, the social subjects involved, the data collection instruments, and the procedures used for data analysis.

3.1 Research approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which is well suited to the aim of understanding physical activity practices among university students from the perspective of their individual experiences and perceptions. According to Gerhardt and Silveira (2009), qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, emphasising the meanings attributed by individuals to their lived contexts. This approach was chosen due to the need to capture motivations, barriers, and subjective interpretations related to physical activity practices throughout the academic journey.

3.2 Type of research

The present study is characterised as descriptive research, aimed at identifying patterns and behaviours related to the consumption of physical activity among students enrolled in the Business Administration programme at UNIOESTE – Francisco Beltrão campus. According to Rampazzo (2005), this type of research seeks to describe the frequency, nature, and interrelationships of phenomena. Gil (2002) describes it as a methodological strategy that enables the mapping of characteristics within a particular group or social reality. Accordingly, this study aims to describe how these practices evolve throughout the undergraduate programme and how they reflect on students' well-being.

3.3 Research participants

The research participants are students regularly enrolled between the first and fourth year of the Business Administration course at the State University of Western Paraná (UNIOESTE), Francisco Beltrão campus, during the 2024 academic year. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, using an open invitation disseminated via an online form distributed directly to student groups. According to Minayo (2017), this strategy is valid in qualitative studies, particularly when associated with the criterion of saturation, which was used to determine the end of data collection – that is, when additional interviews no longer yielded relevant new information.

3.4 Data construction and analysis

Data construction was carried out through semi-structured interviews, guided by a pre-established script. As described by Duarte and Barros (2006), semi-structured interviews provide a basic framework of questions while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes during the conversation. This approach enables a deeper exploration of participants' individual experiences, allowing for data gathering from both students who engage in physical activity and those who do not.

The interviews covered aspects such as daily habits, motivations, perceived barriers, and the impact of academic routines on exercise practices. The flexibility of the interview script allowed for adjustments in the conduct of the interviews according to respondents' answers, while maintaining a focus on the study's central issues.

The empirical material was analysed using content analysis (Bardin, 2016), which was conducted in three stages: pre-analysis, involving the organisation of raw data; material exploration, where responses were grouped into categories; and

treatment and interpretation of results, wherein the data were analysed systematically. The categorical analysis (the specific mode of content analysis used in this research) enabled the identification of patterns, recurrences, and shared meanings among participants, forming the interpretative basis of the study.

3.5 Use of generative ai in this research

In adherence to ethical guidelines, the authors declare that this study made use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools. Specifically, the ChatGPT platform developed by OpenAI was employed for the purposes of textual revision and translation.

Each section of the manuscript was copied and pasted into the platform in an independent session, with prior chat history cleared before initiating a new one. In each session, the prompt used was the following: *“I am writing a scientific paper to be submitted to an academic event, but the article must be written in British English. I will paste a chapter of the paper and I need you to translate it for me, sticking strictly to what is written (i.e., respect the information and references used). Make the writing fluid, as if it were written by a British academic with excellent clarity of expression. Do not insert external information or invent anything (i.e., no hallucinations). Respond ‘ok, let’s begin’ if you understand my instructions.”*

Finally, the authors state that no data obtained from respondents were submitted in full for training the tool used. They also clarify that the GAI was used with the aim of improving textual fluency and grammatical precision, given that, although one of the authors is fluent in English, they may still commit grammatical errors that a native speaker would not.

4 RESULTS

This section elucidates the configurations of physical activity (PA) practices among undergraduate Business Administration students at the State University of Western Paraná (UNIOESTE), Francisco Beltrão campus, throughout their degree programme. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between November and December 2024, totalling approximately 4 hours and 43 minutes of recorded material. Participants were selected via convenience sampling, with screening to ensure equitable representation by year of study and gender (two men and two women from each year), and data collection concluded upon theoretical saturation. All interviewees (aged 18–28, mean 21, with equal gender distribution) balanced academic responsibilities with professional occupations. Overall, 56.25% reported regular PA engagement, while 43.75% did not. This analysis, informed by Shove, Pantzar, and Watson’s (2012) practice theory, explores how bodily practices emerge, persist, and transform under academic and professional pressures. Table 1 and Table 2 detail the respondents’ profiles and their engagement in physical activities, highlighting weight training, walking, and team sports as the most commonly practised modalities.

Table 1 – General profile of participants

Profile		N	%
Gender	Male	8	50%
	Female	8	50%

	Total	16	100%
Age group	18-20 years	9	56.25%
	21-23 years	2	12.5%
	24-26 years	3	18.75%
	27-28 years	2	12.5%
	Total	16	100%
Year of study	1st year	4	25%
	2nd year	4	25%
	3rd year	4	25%
	4th year	4	25%
	Total	16	100%
Regular physical activity	Practitioners	9	56.25%
	Men	4	44.44%
	Women	5	55.55%
	Non-practitioners	7	43.75%
	Men	4	44.44%
	Women	3	33.33%
	Total	16	100%

Source: Research data (2025).

Table 2 – Individual participant profiles

Student	Age	Gender	Year	Regular physical activity?	Type of activity
E1	18	Female	1	Yes	Weight training
E2	24	Female	1	No	-
E3	18	Male	1	Yes	Running and walking
E4	18	Male	1	No	-
E5	20	Female	2	Yes	Walking and skipping rope
E6	18	Male	2	No	-
E7	22	Female	2	Yes	Volleyball, walking, swimming, stationary bike
E8	19	Male	2	Yes	Walking
E9	20	Female	3	No	-
E10	18	Female	3	Yes	Weight training
E11	23	Male	3	Yes	Football and walking
E12	24	Male	3	No	-
E13	19	Female	4	Yes	Weight training
E14	27	Female	4	No	-
E15	24	Male	4	Yes	Football and futsal
E16	28	Male	4	No	-

Source: Research data (2025).

These demographic and behavioural engagement data provide a starting point for the subsequent analysis of how bodily practices emerge, persist, and transform over the course of university life, in response to the pressures of academic and professional contexts (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012).

4.1 Configurations of PA practices: elements, connections and transformations

The analysis of physical activity modalities reveals not only the students' choices but also the dynamic interaction between the material, competence, and meaning elements that constitute these practices. Flexibility and autonomy emerged as central meanings in the selection of practices, while the scarcity of material resources (time and money) and the decline in competences (due to injuries) acted as significant barriers.

Among the participants who reported engaging in physical activities regularly, a variety of modalities was identified, with strength training, walking/running, and team sports standing out. Table 3 presents the frequency of the main practices mentioned, as well as the reasons associated with the choice of each modality:

Table 3 – Types of activities

Activity	N	%	Main reasons
Team sports	3	33.33%	Such as volleyball and football, motivated by social interaction and a history of sports practice since childhood.
Walking/running	6	66.66%	Mainly undertaken for financial reasons, schedule adaptability, and the freedom of individual execution.
Weight training	3	33.33%	Chosen for ease of inclusion in daily routine and for promoting muscle strengthening and aesthetic gains.
Other	3	22.22%	Skiping rope, stationary biking and swimming were also mentioned in specific situations.

Source: Research data (2025).

Weight training was mentioned by 33.33% of practitioners due to its ease of integration into their routine and the benefits of muscle strengthening and aesthetic improvements. Although this practice depends on specific material elements (gyms, equipment), it offers a self-directed competence that is attractive under restricted time conditions (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). Student E1 (female, 18 years old, 1st year) illustrates: "The gym is much more flexible, I think that's an advantage. You might be there with others, but each exercise is just you and yourself, so to speak." This sense of flexibility is reinforced by E9 (female, 20 years old, 3rd year): "Weight training is something I can do on my own time, alone, whenever I want." These statements exemplify the reconfiguration of the meaning of practice from collective to individual, adapting to the intense demands of university and professional life. Aesthetic goals ("I wanted to lose weight and I don't have money to go to the gym because I'm an intern" – E5, female, 20 years old, 2nd year) and therapeutic goals (post-injury) represent additional meanings that drive engagement, in line with literature on aesthetics and well-being (Nasser et al., 2016; Paffenbarger; Lee, 1996). However, the material constraint of gym opening hours ("If there were, for instance, a gym open from 11pm to midnight, I'd find a way, I'd do it. That way, I'd leave university, work out, and go home, all sorted" – E16, male, 28 years old, 4th year) shows how infrastructure can hinder the continuity of practice even when motivation (meaning) is high.

Walking and running, reported by 66.66% of participants, stand out due to their low material demands, widely diffused competence, and flexible scheduling, making them ideal for students facing financial and time constraints. According to Nasser et al. (2016), these activities are often associated with leisure, being more adaptable to individual routines. E3 (male, 18 years old, 1st year) illustrates this autonomy: "To play football I depend on lots of things and people. Running and walking, I don't. I can go alone, whenever I want, wherever I want, as much as I want." This renegotiation of the

meaning of the practice (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012), shifting from social to individual and autonomous, is a direct response to institutional pressures such as academic workload and professional demands.

Team sports (football and volleyball), mentioned by 33.33% of participants, were characterised by the meaning of social interaction and a longstanding engagement since childhood. However, the intensification of academic and professional trajectories acts as a disrupter, leading to discontinuity. Interviewee E2 (female, 24 years old, 1st year) reported the interruption of team activities due to scheduling conflicts, while E7 (female, 22 years old, 2nd year), who alternates between modalities (volleyball, walking, swimming, and stationary cycling), exemplifies how the relationship between the practice and its elements (in this case, the materiality of time and the need for other practitioners) is broken or reconfigured (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). The social meaning of team sports, although still desired, is challenged by the unfeasibility of its faithful reproduction under new life conditions.

In terms of weekly frequency, activities ranged from two to six times per week, highlighting students' efforts to maintain some level of practice despite demanding routines.

Beyond the identification of practices, the research also examined the benefits perceived by practitioners, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4 – Perceived benefits

Benefits	Main elements reported
Emotional well-being	Stress reduction; mood improvement.
Physical gains	Increased energy for daily activities and academic tasks; weight loss; muscle strengthening.
Cognitive impacts	Improved concentration and academic productivity; reduction in procrastination.

Source: Research data (2025).

The reported benefits – such as emotional well-being, physical gains, and cognitive impacts – serve as reinforcing meanings for the practice (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). Stress reduction (“to de-stress the mind” – E8, male, 18 years old, 3rd year) and improved disposition and concentration (“[Physical] exercise makes me more focused” – E3, male, 18 years old, 1st year) align with studies linking physical activity to mental health and cognitive performance (Paffenbarger; Lee, 1996; Salve, 2008; Figueiredo et al., 2009; Lerner; Burns; De Róiste, 2011; Schultz; McCarthy, 2013; Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2017; Sousa et al., 2021; WHO, 2020; Gomes Filho, 2024; Obra; Murcia, 2024).

In this context, physical exercise acquires a new meaning: not merely leisure, but a functional strategy for managing academic and professional stress—a “pressure valve” (E13, female, 19 years old, 4th year). This is a symbolic reconfiguration of physical activity, which becomes an instrument for sustaining performance in the “dominant project” of higher education (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012).

Conversely, several barriers were frequently cited, particularly among students who do not maintain a regular practice. Table 5 summarises the main obstacles identified:

Table 5 – Perceived barriers

Barriers	Main elements reported
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Lack of time	The hectic routine of balancing work and studies is the main impediment.
Physical injuries	Previous injuries have led some participants to abandon their usual practices.
Incompatible schedules	Overlap between academic activities and training times limits practice options.

Source: Research data (2025).

The main barriers identified – lack of time, physical injuries, and incompatible schedules – reflect the structural and institutional pressures that destabilise physical activity practices (Deliens et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2019). The often-cited lack of time (Carballo-Fazanes et al., 2020; Chaabna et al., 2022; Lerner; Burns; De Róiste, 2011; Romaguera et al., 2011; Sáez; Solabarrieta; Rubió, 2021) is not merely a matter of scheduling but a reordering of priorities, whereby academic and professional demands become “dominant projects” that marginalise other practices (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). Student E6, who commutes long distances between a rural area and the university campus (thus drastically reducing available free time), illustrates how the materiality of mobility and everyday geography imposes severe constraints on time available for other activities (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012).

Physical injuries, which sidelined five participants, represent a discontinuity of physical competence (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). While strength training is used as a form of rehabilitation post-injury (E5, E10), returning to practice entails a reconstruction of competence and a renegotiation of the meaning of exercise, now focused on recovery and maintenance rather than pure performance. The perception of incompatible schedules (E16) underscores the need for material infrastructure and institutional organisation aligned with university life (Carballo-Fazanes et al., 2020; Deliens et al., 2015).

In summary, the analysis of individual practices reveals a constant tension between the aspiration for personal well-being and the material, temporal, and social contingencies of the university environment (Deliens et al., 2015). Practice theory enables us to observe how the “life of elements” (material, competence, and meaning) is continually put to the test, resulting in either the transformation or discontinuation of practices.

4.2 Impact of academic routine: the reconfiguration of practice trajectories

The university routine significantly transforms PA practices, acting as a powerful factor for reconfiguration or discontinuity (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012; Thomas et al., 2019). Notably, 14 of 16 participants (87.5%) reported interrupting, reducing frequency, or altering their PA modalities due to increased workload and course demands.

Progression through the academic years emerged as a key factor in this transformation. As students advance, especially in their final years, academic activities intensify, hindering PA maintenance. As one participant exemplifies:

My routine changed a lot because I moved cities, so new responsibilities came up that I didn't have before, but in the early years of university I was able to maintain a training routine. [...] and now in the fourth year, my attendance at the gym has dropped significantly (E13, female, 19 years old, 4th year).

This illustrates the emergence of "dominant projects," such as course completion and professional demands, which absorb most of students' time and energy. This competition for temporal resources leads to a reorganisation of daily practices, often marginalising PA or renegotiating it for periods of lower demand, such as weekends. This trend of declining PA during undergraduate studies, particularly in later years, is corroborated by existing literature (Alkhateeb et al., 2019; Deliens et al., 2015; Edelmann et al., 2022; Keating et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2019).

The data also indicate a correlation between students' working hours and their engagement in physical activity. Of the seven students who did not engage in physical exercise regularly, six were in full-time employment, which intensifies both time scarcity and the depletion of energetic competence required for physical engagement (Thomas et al., 2019). Conversely, most regular practitioners had part-time or flexible working arrangements – interns (E3, E5, E8), holders of institutional grants (E10, E13), or family business employees (E1) – allowing for greater flexibility in integrating exercise into their routines. This underscores how the materiality of work structures and time flexibility are crucial for the reproduction of exercise practices (Bopp et al., 2024; Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). The literature further notes that employed students are less likely to be physically active (Obra; Murcia, 2024).

Weekend PA demonstrates a temporal and spatial reconfiguration of routines (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). Collective modalities – such as football (E13, E15) and volleyball (E7) – and outdoor activities – such as running and walking (E3, E5, E7, E8) – gain preference, reconciling well-being desires with weekday limitations. This adaptation prioritises leisure and socialisation meanings when restrictions ease, though it represents a provisional reproduction, not continuous integration.

Participants also highlighted the relationship between physical exercise and academic performance. The perception that physical engagement improves concentration and reduces procrastination reveals a mutual shaping between different practices. Student E7 (22 years old, 2nd year) illustrated this perception by stating: "It's not just that it tires the body, but it clears the mind. It's like there's this pressure, and when you work out, it releases a valve and that pressure drops." Similarly, E13 (19 years old, 4th year) reported that, after resuming physical activity, she felt more energised and productive:

I went over two months without doing any physical activity, and now that I've started again, over the past month and a half, I can feel the difference – it gives me more energy. When I wasn't working out, I felt more tired because I had no outlet for the stress. So, like it or not, getting back into training is doing me good mentally. As a result, I feel more motivated to sit down and study. During those two months when I wasn't exercising, I didn't go to the gym because I was sitting down writing [my dissertation]. I'd spend like two and a half to three hours a day, straight, writing, but I was always tired and unmotivated. Now I feel a bit more enthusiastic (E13, female, 19 years old, 4th year).

This is a clear instance of one practice symbolically and materially reconfigured to support another, influencing cognitive competences and overall disposition (Lerner; Burns; De Róiste, 2011; Obra; Murcia, 2024). Even inactive students recognise this connection – for instance, E6 (18 years old, 2nd year) stated that when he lacks motivation to study, "it's good to do some physical exercise to help retain the material" – reinforcing the meaning attributed to physical activity in relation to productivity.

Thus, the trajectory of Business students at UNIOESTE is marked by a dynamic of discontinuity and reconfiguration of bodily habits, driven by the intensification of institutional and social pressures. These pressures act directly upon the availability of material elements (time, infrastructure), the maintenance of competences, and the renegotiation of meanings associated with physical engagement, compelling students to adapt their routines in a provisional – and often insufficient – manner.

4.3 Discussion

This study largely corroborates documented trends in PA among university students but deepens understanding by analysing the interaction and reconfiguration of practice elements (materials, competences, and meanings) within Business Administration undergraduate studies. This section aims to critically engage the findings with practice theory and studies conducted in diverse contexts, in order to discern the nature of these transformations and their potential generalisability.

Traditional literature identifies lack of time, fatigue, financial constraints, and limited infrastructure as primary PA barriers (Carballo-Fazanes et al., 2020; Chaabna et al., 2022; Gomes Filho, 2024; Roberts et al., 2024; Sousa et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019; WHO, 2020). Our findings at UNIOESTE confirm these barriers. However, practice theory allows us to move beyond mere identification.

"Lack of time" is not simply an absence of hours, but a reconfiguration of "dominant projects" in students' lives (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012). Academic workload and employment take symbolic and temporal precedence, relegating physical activity to a secondary or functional position (e.g., as a means to relieve stress or enhance academic performance). This process illustrates a renegotiation of the meanings attributed to both time and the practice itself.

Similarly, "limited infrastructure" and "financial issues" represent material restrictions impeding practice reproduction. When gyms are paid and hours rigid, the materiality of the practice becomes a hindrance, leading to migration towards less material-intensive practices (e.g., walking), aligning with Shove et al.'s (2012) observation that a practice's spread depends on the "ready availability of requisite elements" (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012, p. 43).

The observed progressive decline in frequency and modality shift (from team sports to individual activities) throughout the degree converges with previous studies (Alkhateeb et al., 2019; Deliens et al., 2015; Edelman et al., 2022; Figueiredo et al., 2009; Mielke et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2019). However, practice theory interprets this not as passive abandonment, but as an active attempt at reconfiguration in response to discontinuities imposed by institutional and social pressures. In this regard, institutional intervention becomes critical. As shown by Silva and Nunes (2019), incentive programmes, appropriate infrastructure, and health promotion policies can enhance student participation by mitigating such barriers.

The symbolic reconfiguration of physical activity—as a tool for stress management and academic enhancement—is a crucial aspect. Exercise is no longer solely an end in itself but becomes a means to sustain the dominant project of academic achievement. This utilitarian framing grants the practice a new meaning, making it more resilient to external pressures.

In comparing profiles of practices and barriers, we observe that declining physical engagement throughout the course of study is a widely documented trend (Alkhateeb et al., 2019; Deliëns et al., 2015; Keating et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2019), suggesting that the findings at UNIOESTE may be transferable to other university contexts. The predominance of “lack of time” and “fatigue” as barriers is consistent with international studies, such as those conducted in Turkey and Belgium (Deliëns et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2024), as well as with research involving university students in Spain (Carballo-Fazanes et al., 2020; Sáez; Solabarrieta; Rubió, 2021).

Gender differences in physical activity—where men are often more active or engage in more vigorous modalities (Chaabna et al., 2022; Clemente et al., 2016; Obra; Murcia, 2024; Sáez; Solabarrieta; Rubió, 2021; Wilson et al., 2019)—were not the primary focus of our qualitative analysis. However, participant profiles (Table 1) indicate that, at UNIOESTE, women displayed a greater diversity of modalities, whereas other studies suggest that women may face greater challenges or prefer less competitive activities (Lerner; Burns; De Róiste, 2011; Thomas et al., 2019). This finding suggests that while general patterns may exist, nuances of engagement can vary locally depending on institutional culture and the opportunities available (Arias-Palencia et al., 2015; Clemente et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2020). For instance, the availability of campus spaces or targeted programmes may help mitigate some of these differences (Carballo-Fazanes et al., 2020; Clemente et al., 2016; Deliëns et al., 2015).

The correlation between working hours and reduced physical engagement also aligns with the literature (Bopp et al., 2024; Lowry et al., 2000), reinforcing the notion that the materiality of professional commitments constitutes a significant barrier to sustaining active routines. However, the detail regarding work flexibility (e.g., internships, grants) as an enabler adds a layer of complexity, demonstrating that it is not merely the fact of working, but how work integrates—or conflicts—with study practices and self-care (Shove; Pantzar; Watson, 2012).

When interpreted through the lens of practice theory, the results from UNIOESTE reveal that the dynamics of emergence, persistence, and disappearance of practices are mediated by the constant negotiation between material elements, competences, and meanings, within a context of increasing institutional and social pressures. The university, as a “niche” where practices are reproduced and transformed, must remain attentive to these interactions if it is to promote genuine transitions towards healthier lifestyles. This demands not only incentive programmes, but also a deep understanding of how practices and their constituent elements are interconnected and compete for space and meaning in students’ lives.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The present study adopted the theoretical framework of Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) to elucidate the complex dynamics of physical activity (PA) practices among Business Administration undergraduates at UNIOESTE, Francisco Beltrão campus. Our qualitative analysis corroborates the widely documented decline in PA engagement among university students, but critically extends this understanding by revealing how and why these practices are reconfigured under increasing academic and professional pressures.

We found that the emergence, persistence, and discontinuation of PA practices are mediated by a continuous negotiation among their constituent elements: materials, competences, and meanings. The often-cited "lack of time," for instance, is not merely a scheduling issue but a symbolic reconfiguration of "dominant projects," where academic and employment demands relegate PA to a secondary or functional role, primarily for stress management or academic enhancement. This grants PA a new, utilitarian meaning, making it more resilient to external pressures.

Furthermore, material constraints such as limited infrastructure and financial concerns restrict the reproduction of certain practices, prompting a migration towards less materially demanding activities like walking or running. The observed shift from collective to individual sports, particularly in later years of study, exemplifies an active attempt at reconfiguring practices in response to institutional and social discontinuities, prioritising autonomy and flexibility. The generalisability of these findings regarding declining engagement and prevalent barriers, such as time constraints and fatigue, is consistent with international university contexts. However, we also noted local nuances in engagement, particularly across genders, influenced by institutional culture and available opportunities.

These insights offer crucial implications for institutional intervention, moving beyond mere incentive programmes to necessitate a profound understanding of how practices and their elements interlink and compete for space and meaning in students' lives. Universities should strategically adapt to these dynamics, considering the materiality of work structures and the flexibility of time as key facilitators for sustaining active routines. This demands a more incisive approach to policy that acknowledges students' budgetary and time limitations, providing viable institutional pathways for PA engagement.

For future research, it is imperative to complement this qualitative foundation with robust quantitative and longitudinal methodologies. This should involve: Objective measurement of physical activity – employing accelerometers and other wearable devices to overcome self-report biases and provide precise data on intensity, duration, and frequency; Wider generalisability studies – conducting research with statistically representative samples across diverse universities, courses, and regions to identify broader behavioural and contextual patterns; Establishing causal relationships – utilising advanced statistical analyses, such as logistic regression and structural equation modelling, to investigate how the interplay between materials, competences, meanings, and socio-demographic factors influences health and academic outcomes.

In this way, the present study offers an interpretive foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of physical activity practices within the university environment. When interpreted through the lens of practice theory, the results from UNIOESTE highlight that health promotion is not merely a matter of incentive programmes, but rather demands a deep and ongoing understanding of how practices and their constituent elements compete for space and meaning in students' lives. By adopting more responsive institutional approaches and pursuing broader future research, universities can indeed play a pivotal role in fostering healthier and more resilient lifestyles among future generations of professionals.

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